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The Gardens and Landscape of Rothamsted Manor - an Historical Report

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Rothamsted Research

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4. SIR JOHN WITTEWRONGE, AND THE GARDENS AND LANDSCAPE 1623-1693

The Wittewronge family arrived in England from Ghent in 1564 to escape religious persecution in their native Flanders.[8] They became wealthy and respected members of the Flemish colony in London, with considerable interests in the brewing trade. Rothamsted was mortgaged to Jacob Wittewronge in 1611, bought outright by his widow Anne in 1623, and formally passed to their son John on his majority in 1639. John Wittewronge (1618-1693) was brought up at the house of his step-father, Sir Thomas Myddelton, a former Lord Mayor of London. He studied at Oxford, travelled abroad in 1637, and became involved in public life in London and at Court. In 1641 he was knighted, was married for the second time and took up residence at Rothamsted, which remained his principal residence for the rest of his life.

At the start of the Civil War in August 1642 Sir John joined the Parliamentary forces and saw active service until the following autumn. While continuing his involvement in public affairs he also pursued financial, business and property interests, which enabled him to carry out considerable alterations at his Rothamsted estate in the late 1640's and early 1650's. He would have been aware of current ideas and fashions in architecture and gardening through his connections, his education and travels, and his proximity to the great estates of Hertfordshire. He applied these ideas to his comparatively modest estate as appropriate to his wealth, status and aspirations. Sir John was elected to the first Parliament of the Protectorate from 1654-1658. At the Restoration he received a royal pardon, and in 1662 he was created a baronet. In 1663 he bought a property at Stantonbury in Buckinghamshire, where he enlarged and remodelled the house for his son John. From the 1660's until his death in 1693, Sir John's attention was increasingly focussed on the management of the Rothamsted estate, and his notebooks record his keen interest in the farm, brew-house, woodland and garden. A chronology of Sir John's period at Rothamsted is given in Appendix D.

In the contemporary spirit of enquiry and observation, he kept a 'Diary of Weather' from 1683-1689, in which he described daily weather conditions and wind direction. This provides rare detail of weather patterns from the period before formal meteorological recording, and has recently been published.[9] Adding to the interest of the diary are brief comments written alongside the weather entries which describe happenings and activities on the estate and in the gardens. With regard to farming on the estate, references are made to the progress and yields of crops, harvesting, haymaking, brewing and livestock. Within the gardens a few entries refer to flowers, but most concern plants and fruit raised for his own consumption, and cover not only the dates of flowering, fruiting and harvesting, but also the quality of the eating. Of additional use to this study is that some of the entries record changes to the design, while others refer incidentally to features about which we would otherwise know nothing. Taken together, this builds up a picture of mature and well-stocked walled gardens and orchards with a variety of ornamental and formal features, but devoted largely to productive plants. A list of plants mentioned in the diary is given in Appendix C.

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[8] For Wittewronge family history, see Boalch, *op. cit.*

[9] HALS *D/Elw F19*, published as; Sir John Wittewronge, *op. cit.*

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Comparison between the 1623 map [Maps 3,4,15] and Dury & Andrews' map of 1766 or the 1838 Tithe map [Maps 5,9] reveals a number of changes that transformed the estate from the Elizabethan (or Medieval) layout of 1623. These include the enlargement and regularisation of the walled area to the north of the house and the re-organisation of the field boundaries, apparently responding to the orientation of the house. Other changes less obvious from the maps had taken place: the house shown in the 1624 sketch was transformed, new outbuildings were built, extensive tree-planting was undertaken, the palings to the front court were replaced with walls, and a western avenue approach was established. Sir John's alterations to the house are well documented and survive largely intact, and it is clear that he carried out the majority of these changes to the estate, but unfortunately no maps, illustrations or descriptive accounts from his time were found during this research, and there is no overall picture of the gardens and landscape until at least 70 years after his death. That Sir John was responsible for the changes may be assumed for many reasons: their 17th Century stylistic characteristics, the survival of 17th Century brickwork in the garden walls that could only date from his period, and the fact that of Rothamsted's occupants between 1623 and the mid 19th Century he was the wealthiest, the most energetic and ambitious, and the longest-lived. He was also demonstrably interested in his estate and gardens. The account below is based on the fragmentary evidence of memoranda and accounts which mention particular features or changes, and represents an attempt to correlate these with surviving maps and with the gardens as they are today. In the light of this evidence, Map 14 is the author's attempt to show how the estate may have looked at the time of the 'Diary of Weather' in the late 17th century.

The account books and notebooks from Sir John's time provide by far the fullest record of any period covered by the Wittewronge Collection at HALS. The record is not, however, complete or continuous. Payments known to have been made do not always appear, and there are gaps in the sequence (eg 1649-1652) where it is unclear whether work was suspended, unrecorded, or whether the record is lost. Notebooks were often used only in part and some were re-used many years later. Memoranda appear almost anywhere; in separate books, or mixed in with accounts. Accounts for building work cover labour and materials, but seldom refer to specific items of work.

The 1623 inventory and map show that there were already established gardens at the time of the sale, but the description suggests that they had suffered some neglect over the previous years. A few repairs were carried out when Sir John took up residence as a later memorandum states; 'I had an Oake groweing in the warren which I caused to bee felled when I began to repair my house at Rothamsted about Anno 1638 or 1639'[10], but there is no record of major changes to the house and gardens until the late 1640's.

In 1647 the first payments to brick-makers appear in the account books, and they continue until 1653.[11] In this period the house was re-fronted in brick, dutch gables were added to the triangular pediments shown on the 1624 sketch, and it was extended with new bays at both ends of the south front. Three bays with dutch gables in a similar but more ornamented style to those on the south

[10] HALS *D/Elw F20,* also quoted in Boalch, *op.cit.*

[11] The building accounts for the house are examined in; J.Carpenter, This is the House that Jack Built, *Newsletter of Harpenden Historical Society.*

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front were added to create a new front on the west side with an open loggia (glazed in the 19th Century) on the ground floor, which Sir John referred to as 'The Arches'. A clock tower was added over the main entrance, which houses a bell dated 1650. Work was also undertaken in repairing, improving and adding to the outbuildings.

The period of greatest activity in the building works is recorded in the account books following the heading; 'Primo April 1648 – Charges aboute the building'.[12] The entries include digging sand, gathering stones, brick-making, lime-burning, tiling, plastering, carpentry, joinery and general labour. There are few explicit references to where the work was undertaken, but it is clear that it went beyond the house itself, extending, for example, to 'boarding in the Stables'. The brick-making was at its peak in 1649, and the quantity is recorded in an entry following that for 1st March 1649/50: 'Memorandum. There was burnt 184,000 of brick this year, 385 quarters of lime'.

The gardens are not mentioned in these accounts, but there can be little doubt that work was underway concurrently with the changes to the house. In 1648 'rayles' were installed by 'the new Moate'. In preparation for the new enlarged gardens and orchard, the moat shown in the 1623 map must have been filled in on the north and west sides, and a new moat (or ditch) dug further out. It is likely that the eastern side of the ditch was also altered. The ha-ha to the west of the formal parterres may date from this time.

In June 1649, payments to bricklayers were made 'for 36 pole of walling…and for 7 buttresses - £27-06-00' and similar entries for smaller quantities were made around that time. This suggests work of a routine and repetitive nature rather than that undertaken in the detailed and ornamental work on the house, and is a quantity greater than would be expected to be required for the house and outbuildings after two years' work. The payment is most likely, therefore, to refer to the construction of the new garden walls. In November payments were made to an elderly 'weeding-woman' in the garden, and the following January 'gilly-flowers' were brought from London, suggesting that new flower planting was underway in the garden. In August 1652 Sir John recorded 'Ripe Grapes & Peaches'[13], and the significance of this event may be gauged from the fact that the previous entry in the notebook was the birth of a daughter in April of that year. Later in life Sir John was to record similar events in his garden in some detail, but this is one of the first such references, and indicates that he was pleased to see his new gardens beginning to mature in the early 1650's.

In the Weather Diary, Sir John refers mainly to individual plants [see Appendix C], but there are also a few indications of alterations to the design of the gardens. In February 1685/6, for example, he 'sett the box that grew in the Knott, in the borders in the garden next the gravel walks'. This change reflected the fashion for the box-edged 'plat-bande' which was to flourish under William & Mary. There is no indication of where the 'Knott' was located, but it would have been close to the house, probably in the area immediately to the north or west. It may have been a survivor, at least in part, from the pre-1623 gardens. The only references to topiary trees or statuary appear in an entry for February 1686/7, when 7 yew trees were planted, 'one whereof is sett in the place where the

[12] HALS *D/Elw F23*.
[13] HALS *D/Elw F42*.

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stone boy stood'. In addition to these yew trees, it is likely that the 'old yew arbor' repaired by Jacob Wittewronge in 1721 (see next chapter) dated from Sir John's day. Yew trees in the garden were first mentioned in a memorandum of February 1665/6, when one was replaced with a pine. Yews became particularly fashionable in the 1680's, largely as a result of their survival in the exceptional winter of 1683 which had killed many other ornamental trees including the previously favoured cypresses, as was observed by Sir John in the early days of his weather diary.

Sir John's records do not appear to make reference to the front court described in 1623, but given the fashions of the day, it is likely that it was retained and updated in keeping with the house. The fact that the line of the court (30 yards square, as described in the inventory) can still sometimes be traced in the front lawn[14] suggests that footings may still exist, or may have been removed to leave an infilled trench. This would be consistent with walls, rather than the paling of 1623. This would be consistent with the typical layout of the period, with a gate set between piers giving access to an entrance courtyard in enclosing walls, across which a central 'broadwalk' flanked by lawns led to the main entrance. It is interesting to note that a payment to a mason for stone balls was made in 1658.[15] These may have been used for ornament elsewhere in the gardens, but they were usually used to mark gate piers, and a front court would have been the most likely location.

The 1838 Tithe Map [Map 9] shows the walled gardens and orchard prior to Sir John Bennet Lawes' alterations in the mid-19th Century, and there is no evidence that the outline of these had been changed since Sir John Wittewronge's time. Confirmation that this map shows the lines of Sir John's garden is supplied by his own measurements recorded in a memorandum of 1666.[16] This gives the length of the long walk in the gardens and orchard, running from 'the field before the house' to Dredge field as 486 feet (approx. 148m), and the width of the orchard at the northern end as 146 feet (approx. 44.5m) [Map 14]. These lengths agree almost exactly with the 1838 map when the known dimensions of the front court are added on south of the house.

Sir John's extension of the house made the house project beyond the forecourt on the west side. The new west front included 'The Arches' and overlooked an area reputed to have been a bowling green. Whatever its use, such a major architectural front would have required an appropriate garden to match. Bowling greens were typical features of gardens of the period, but this study found neither supporting nor contradictory documentary evidence in this case. 19th Century maps and views show this area laid to lawn and lying beyond the southern limit of the walled gardens. This may also have been the case in the 17th Century. but it is possible that it was enclosed as indicated on Dury & Andrews' 1766 map [Map 5]. In 1686, Sir John referred to 'the Vine by the Arches', and this appears to have survived into the 19th Century, as shown by later illustrations [Figs. 3,4,7].

The changes to the estate beyond the house and gardens in the 17th Century included alterations to the field boundaries shown on the 1623 map. A more geometrically ordered and orthogonal arrangement was created, oriented parallel to the lines of the house, although a number of irregular

[14] Boalch, *op. cit.*

[15] Transcripts from the Wittewronge Papers, B.P.Scattergood, 1935-1937, Vol.2, Bundle 39.

[16] HALS *D/Elw F20.*

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features were allowed to remain. These changes enhanced the setting of the house and gardens in accordance with the increasingly formal and axial concerns of the day, and followed similar lines to the later pencil additions on the 1623 map, which must have been used in the planning.

The alterations were most extensive to the south and west of the house. Running west from the gate of the front entrance court, a straight avenue was created to the lane between Redbourn and Hatching Green, along the line still existing today. Sir John would have used this route for his frequent travels to and from London, and the emphasis given to the new west front of the house confirms that this was an important approach. To the south of this avenue the pre-existing curved and irregular field boundaries were swept away, and a large, almost rectangular field was created, shown on the 1766 map, and still visible in fragments on the 1st edition 25" OS map [Map 11]. This larger field must have been created after 1667, when the settlement on the marriage of Sir John's son James included 'A close of pasture lying before the said Mansion House called Passage Close containing by estimation 10 acres'[17], which matches the field shown on the 1623 map. To the north and west of the house, the old orchard was extended north and west, and the wooded area of the Warren was moved north, reducing the size of Dredge Field. The line of this new boundary was extended further east, cutting off the southern part of Upper Shepcote Field [Maps 14,15].

Sir John's notebooks contain many references to trees. Most of these concern the management of his woodland, but in addition to records of day-to-day forestry there are some entries that show tree-planting underway to enhance the landscape of the estate. A number of entries show that varied tree planting was undertaken in the Warren to the west of the walled gardens, and that the Warren was thus increasingly considered to be part of the garden area. Access to walks through the Warren plantation from the walled gardens was probably from a gate at the western end of the orchard crosswalk. Planting included fruit trees, broadleaf natives, and a mix of conifers, which were considered ornamental and very desirable for a plantation. A memorandum of February 1665/6 mentions firs planted in the Warren and in 'the new warren orchard', and also the pruning of young trees.[18] The marriage settlement of 1667 describes the 5 acres of the Warren as a 'close of pasture adjoining the orchard or garden wall of the Mansion House called the New Orchard and Plantation'.[19] The effect of the evergreen conifer planting was such, that Jacob Wittewronge referred to the Warren as the 'ffurr grove' in the 1720's.

In the 1670's planting was carried out in the Park to the east of the house, and a memorandum of November 1674 states; 'made an End of setting ye Wood at ye left [side?] & further end of ye Park on ye left hand of ye long walk'.[20] The 'long walk' probably followed the line of the eastern approach shown in 1623. The wood and scattered parkland trees to the north-west of this route appear on the 1766 map, and survived largely intact on the 3rd edition OS map of 1924.

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[17] Scattergood, *op. cit.*, Vol.2, Bundle 39.
[18] HALS *D/Elw F20.*
[19] Scattergood, *op. cit.*, Vol.2, Bundle 39.
[20] HALS *D/Elw F42.*