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The Gardens and Landscape of Rothamsted Manor - an Historical Report

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Rothamsted Research

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6. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ESTATE FROM 1728 TO THE PRESENT

This account of the development of the estate from the 18th Century is based on analysis of maps and illustrations, supported by information from published material, in particular Boalch's history of the Manor.

Dury & Andrew's county map of 1766 [Map 5] shows the estate laid out with avenues and axial development in a form probably little changed since 1728. The approaches from Harpenden and Hatching Green, the western avenue, and the route running across the north side of the manor grounds are all shown as tree-lined avenues. The 'Warren' is shown as a plantation on a regular grid, and the area to the east of the house called the 'Hopp Pasture' in 1623 is shown in a similar style, suggesting an orchard. There is no sign of the influence of the Brownian landscape style.

At about this time the new occupant, John Bennet, commissioned plans from an unknown architect to build a new house in the Adam style. The drawings were never executed and remain in the Wittewronge Collection.

Thomas Baskerfield's 'Hertfordshire Illustrated' contains a view of the house dated 1787 [Fig.3] and a sketch-plan of the estate in a map of Harpenden c.1790 [Map 6]. The view shows the western approach curving and arriving at a grassed turning circle in front of the house, separated from the fields or park to the south by an ornamental fence. The walled garden is shown starting at the north of Sir John Wittewronge's west front. The 'Arches' are covered with climbing plants (probably a vine), two conifers are shown in island beds with shrub and flower planting, and conifers are shown in what appears to be a shrubbery on the east side of the house. The plan is little more than an ideogram, but it shows the four-quartered orchard to the north of the house, the eastern yard and outbuildings, and the pond, and it hints at the avenues. An interesting aspect is an exedral feature to the west of orchard cross-walk with an axial line extending into the Warren plantation. This is reminiscent of the Warren avenue laid out in the early 1900's further to the south.

In the early 19th Century, the 1822 Bryant county map [Map 7] and the 1st edition 1" OS map of 1835 [Map 8] show the area around the house and particularly to the south as open parkland. The OS map also shows four clumps in the park which would have featured prominently in views from the house. The most southerly of these was located on the line of the 1721 elm avenue, as shown on the 1st edition 6" OS map of 1878 [Map 10].

The 1838 Tithe Map [Map 9] shows the extent of the walled orchard, and the smaller walled garden close to the house is divided in two. Other features of interest are the pond shown in the eastern yard which appears nowhere else in the record, and the small building at north-west corner of the orchard in the approximate location of the existing summerhouse. In the accompanying field lists, the large field to the south of the house is listed as 'Home Field, arable, John Sarnell'.

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In 1834, Sir John Bennet Lawes took up residence at Rothamsted.[22] He set up a laboratory and began investigations on the manuring of agricultural plants, first in pots, and then on the home farm. The classic systematic field experiments started in 1843, and subsequently he was to devote 40 acres of the estate to research. He had taken out his first patent for super-phosphate fertilizer in 1842, and by 1847 he was beginning to see good returns, although the requirements of his scientific and business interests did not yet allow for major alterations to the gardens. In the same year his wife Lady Caroline Lawes painted the house from the south west, showing the same features as the 1787 view, but with some additional round island beds arranged informally on the west lawn [Fig. 4]. At about this time she also painted a view of the house from the pond [Fig. 5] which appears to show the park running up to the house, but it may be assumed that the cows were in reality excluded from the lawns in front of the house.

In 1863, in celebration of the coming-of-age Sir John's son Charles, the Great Drawing-Room was added in two bays extending to the north of Sir John Wittewronge's 3-bay west front, with Dutch gables in a matching style [Figs.2,10]. Two greenhouses were also added flanking the drawing-room to the north [Fig.7]. This work necessitated changes to the gardens, including the demolition of the southern garden walls. The walled garden adjacent to the house was removed and the larger walled area to the north was cut in half; a new wall running north from the west wing created a reduced kitchen garden to the east, and opened up the western half as formal parterres, enclosed to the west and south with a low terracotta wall. This layout is essentially that remaining today. A clear indication of Sir John Bennet Lawes' priorities is given by the fact that, despite the creation of this new formal layout, the continuous clover bed experiment set up in 1854 in the old walled garden was allowed to remain in position, now stranded off-axis in the ornamental lawn.

The 1st edition 6" and 25" OS maps were surveyed in 1878 and published in 1884 [Maps 10,11], and together with the article and illustrations in the Gardeners' Chronicle of 1875[23] [Figs.7,8], they give a good impression of the changes made in the 1860's. In addition to the areas around the house mentioned above, the maps show a number of interesting features in the 'Warren' and woodland to the west, which is shown with a variety of conifer and broadleaf planting.

An avenue is cut through the trees and extends in lines of broadleaf trees in the field beyond, oriented slightly north of square from the house. It is separated from the formal gardens by the ha-ha ditch. The fact that the avenue aligns with the windows of the drawing-room extension [Fig.16] suggests that it may be of a similar date, and there is no specific reference to this feature in the documentary record earlier than these maps. There was a fashion for avenues in the 1850's and 1860's, although these were often of conifers. Nevertheless its provenance remains obscure, and it may be of 18th Century origin. The intermittent trees and the ragged edges of the avenue seem to support this. It is tempting for the author to believe, albeit with insufficient evidence, that this feature was laid out by Jacob Wittewronge in the 1720's as one of his 'wood-walks', and was recorded in Baskerfield's rough map c.1790, albeit in slightly the wrong location.

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[22] For an account of Bennet Lawes' life, see Boalch, *op. cit.*

[23] *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 5.6.1875, pp.720-1.

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To the south of the woodland, one of the lines of trees shown running along the western approach was the lime avenue mentioned and illustrated in the Gardeners' Chronicle article [Fig.8]. This lime walk formed part of a woodland walk that started from the front lawn and led around the southern and western edges of the 17th Century 'Warren'. The map shows new tree planting on either side of the field to the west of the wood (no.551 on 1st edition 25" map). This was arranged in such a way that the view across the landscape beyond was obscured until the point where the perimeter walk crossed the avenue. A branch from the perimeter walk went past the icehouse and then continued west and north along a further woodland walk kept separate from the estate tracks, leading through a new mixed plantation to Knot Wood.

Other features shown for the first time on these maps are areas of field experiments, and the three lodges on each of the approaches; from Harpenden, from Hatching Green, and towards Redbourn to the west.

The next period of change in the gardens was the first decade of the 20th Century. On the death of Sir John Bennet Lawes in 1900, Rothamsted was inherited by his son Sir Charles Lawes-Wittewronge (1843-1911), but the agricultural experiments on the estate were continued under the auspices of a trust. Sir Charles was an accomplished athlete and sculptor and did not share his father's scientific leanings, tending towards the arts. He was interested in genealogy and heraldry, and he undertook extensive work in the house in accordance with his desire to see Rothamsted as a country seat appropriate to the Wittewronge pedigree. He bought a large number of art objects and furnishings for the house and ornaments for the garden. Many of these were later sold, but some still remain.

Sir Charles' changes to the estate are shown on the 3rd edition 25" OS map [Map 12]. In the gardens, he removed his father's greenhouses to the north of the Great Drawing-Room and built a library at an angle, incorporating an earlier wall [Fig.2]. He built ornamental gables to the top of the kitchen garden's west wall [Fig.13], and linked this with the new library with a section of 'crinkle-crankle' wall. He added stone ornaments to the formal parterres, including his own marble sculpture of a reclining woman [Fig.14]. The lawn in front of the west front was planted with carpet bedding, as mentioned in an account of 1905 and shown on a postcard of c.1910 [Fig.10]. In the 'Warren' he created a formal avenue [Fig.16] along the line of the earlier clearing, terminating in a circular area designed to receive his large sculptural group 'The Death of Dirce' [Fig.17]. The tree-planting was extended further west to give this setting the required enclosure. To the north of the parterres he created a formal orchard extending west into the 'Warren', and he added further planting to the north around a circular clearing, now planted with yew, and possibly intended for another sculpture. South of the house, the end of the western approach was moved to the south. This created a new west lawn incorporating the limes of the earlier lime walk, and also had the effect of breaking the long perspective of the western approach. In 1906 Rothamsted appeared in 'Country Life'.[24]

Apart from minor alterations, little in the gardens has changed since 1911, although the kitchen garden is no longer used. Beyond the gardens, the character of the surrounding parkland has

[24] *Country Life*, 24.2.1906, p.270; 10.3.1906, p.349.

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understandably been altered as more land has been taken up by experimental fields. Many trees have been lost, including the scattered trees and clumps in the parkland to the south and west of the house. The 1721 elm avenue was lost to Dutch Elm disease in the 1970's, and the last of the limes in the western approach were lost in the storms of 1987.