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The Gardens and Landscape of Rothamsted Manor - an Historical Report

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2. THE MANOR AND GARDENS TODAY (Spring 2001)

Rothamsted is situated on the south-western edge of the town of Harpenden in Hertfordshire, c.2km east of the village of Redbourn and some 6km north-west of St Albans [Map 1]. To the west of the estate the A5183 (Roman Watling Street) runs north-west from St Albans, and to the east the estate extends to Harpenden Common, which is crossed by the A1081 between St Albans and Luton. The southern boundary follows the B487 between Hatching Green and Redbourn.

The estate is owned and administered by the Institute of Arable Crops Research (IACR Rothamsted), and is the oldest and largest agricultural research centre in the UK. The manor house, outbuildings, gardens and adjacent woodland occupy c.10ha at the centre of the estate. The house is used for conferences and meetings, and as a hall of residence for researchers. The gardens lie to the north, west and south of the house [Map 13].

The manor house and surrounding fields occupy a slight plateau at the centre of the site, from which the land gently slopes away on all sides. At present the principal prospect from the manor house is to the south, but views in all directions are to some extent restricted by trees. The similar elevation of land beyond the adjacent valleys and dips makes it unlikely that there were ever very distant views, and the surrounding valleys are obscured because of the extent of the plateau. The estate has a flinty clay soil resting on chalk. The main research campus is on the eastern edge of the site and there is an experimental farm located north-west of the manor house. Experimental fields cover most of the estate. The principal concentrations of trees are in the area around the manor house and in Knot Wood to the west, and there are mature trees along some site roads and field boundaries.

The main entrances to the site are from Harpenden and the Research Station to the north-east and from Hatching Green to the south east, where the driveway is marked by a 19th Century lodge. From these entrances roads follow lime avenues and then join to approach the house along a single road from the east, which forks at the entrance to the manor grounds. The southern fork leads through a shrubbery to the main entrance in the south front of the house. The northern fork arrives at a yard bounded to the north by stable or barn buildings, to the east by a 19th Century cottage, and to the south by the northern wall of the shrubbery [Fig.20]. On the west of the yard, access to the central courtyard of the manor house is through a two-storey gateway building [Fig.21]. The western approach to the house, which is no longer used, arrives at the south front along a straight drive from a 19th Century lodge on the B487.

As far as is known, the house [Figs.2,7,9,10] still stands on the site of the earliest manor house[3]. It is constructed in red brick, and listed Grade I. The majority of the external fabric of the house dates from changes made in the mid-17th Century when it was re-fronted and extended, and it was further extended in a similar style in the mid-19th Century. The principal architectural sides of the building are the south and west fronts, which incorporate 'Dutch' style gables. The main entrance is in the

[3] For the development of the house, see Boalch, *op. cit.*; N.Pevsner, *The Buildings of Hertfordshire*, 1977, pp.159-160; *Victoria County History*, Herts., Vol. 2, 1908, pp.136-138.

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centre of the south front. A central courtyard is enclosed by wings to the north and east, with the gateway in the east wing.

The area of gardens south of the house relates principally to the approaches and the main entrance in the south front. On passing through the shrubbery, the eastern approach divides to form a turning circle, emerging on either side of the lawn in front of the house. The existing layout of this approach was established between 1900 and 1911, having previously followed a more southerly route. A pond lies among mature trees to the south of the shrubbery, and from here a section of ha-ha extends west, overlooking the fields to the south. An ornamental ha-ha wall collapsed in the 1990's. A stone sundial is placed on the axis of the house, and a stone seat is located to the east of the front lawn. An area of lawn extends west of the turning circle and is ornamented with 5 clipped yews on the axis of the formal gardens to the north, from which it is separated by a low wall [Fig.9].

The walled garden lies to the north of the house [Figs. 13,15]. The walls are of red brick and are listed Grade II. The lower part of the east wall is the oldest section in the garden and dates from the 17th Century or possibly earlier. The north wall and the upper part of the east wall are later and are probably 17th Century, although they may have been altered in connection with the construction of a lean-to building outside the walled garden to the north in the 18th or 19th Century. The west wall is 19th Century with early 20th Century ornamental additions echoing the Dutch gables of the house. An arched walk of trained apple trees runs across the walled garden and is aligned with an ironwork gate leading west to the formal garden. The area to the north of the central path is uncultivated, and the area to the south is used as a gardeners' yard.

To the west of the house and walled gardens lie formal grassed parterres [Figs.11,12] which are separated by a ha-ha from the ornamental woodland of the 'Warren' beyond. The west front [Figs. 9,10,11] gives onto the upper parterre, which is flanked by two pairs of clipped yews, and enclosed by a gravel path. This lawn was laid out as a croquet lawn during the 20th Century, and it is reputedly the location of an earlier bowling green[4]. The 'Rose Lawn' to the north is a larger parterre set c.400mm below the level of the croquet lawn, to which it is linked by steps at both sides. It extends slightly north of the end of the west wall of the walled garden, which is lined with a herbaceous border. Flower beds, urns and clipped yews are symmetrically arranged around a central fountain, now dry. A 19th Century ornamental terracotta ha-ha wall with brick piers runs along the western edge. Other features include a reclining white marble nymph by Sir Charles Lawes-Wittewronge which was set on a pedestal in a pool at the south end of the lawn in the early 20th Century [Fig.14], and a rose arch along the western side of the lawn dating from the 1990's. Set within the lawn is a small plot that has been continuously planted with Red Clover since 1854 as part of the classic Rothamsted experiments. North of the Rose Lawn a grassed area with some ornamental tree planting extends to the west. The orchard that was set out in this area in the early 20th Century was removed in the 1980's.

The woodland, known as the 'Warren', lies to the west of the ha-ha and extends to the north of the parterre lawns. It provides a backdrop and a shelter for the house and formal gardens, exhibits

[4] *Welcome to Rothamsted Manor*, leaflet, 1997; Conversation with W.Bothwell.

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evidence of ornamental planting and other features, and has formed an important and integral part of the garden for much of its history. The principal designed feature is a formal avenue through the trees [Fig.16], which was laid out in its present form in the first decade of the 20th Century by Sir Charles Lawes-Wittewronge on the line of an earlier avenue. At the east end, facing the house, the avenue runs from an exedral (semi-circular) grassed area with a large copper beech to one side and two stone 'rococo' urns, and culminates in a circular clearing at the west end, where a sculpture, 'The Death of Dirce', by Sir Charles was set up according to his wishes[5] on his death in 1911 [Fig.17]. The avenue is lined throughout its length with laurel behind clipped yew hedging, which is doubled concentrically to create small compartments at the east end. Access from the croquet lawn is across the ha-ha via two steel bridges, which appear to be additions subsequent to Sir Charles' design. The axis of the avenue is slightly north of the line perpendicular to the house, and aligns with the Great Drawing Room added to the west front by Sir John Bennet Lawes in 1863.

In the woodland to the sides of the set-piece avenue, the trees include oak, ash, sweet chestnut, birch, maple, beech, sycamore, California redwood, spruce, lawson cypress, yew and larch. Trees lost in the 1987 storm included the last remnants of a lime avenue towards the southern edge. In the central area are the remains of a unique but as yet unidentified range of daffodils and rhododendrons, the legacy of a plant-breeding enthusiast who worked at Rothamsted from 1946 to 1974[6]. Further to the west, a line of yew trees remains along the line of the western boundary of the 17th Century 'Warren' woodland. To the south, a few redwoods and yews remain along the line of the old western avenue approach. In the northern section of woodland is an open circle of yew trees planted by Sir Charles at the end of the formal parterre axis [Fig.19], although this is at present obscured by rampant laurels and conifer planting. On the eastern edge of the woodland an octagonal brick and timber summerhouse with a clay-tiled roof [Fig.18] overlooks the Rose Lawn, and a ruined brick icehouse is located further to the west. Concrete foundations in the northern section are likely to date from the period of army use during the 1939-1945 war. Provisions for garden upkeep during the 20th Century did not allow for intensive maintenance of the woodland, and although some walks are still maintained, the depredations of invasive laurel are widespread.

[5] Boalch, *op. cit.*

[6] *Welcome to Rothamsted Manor*, leaflet, 1997.