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The Gardens of Rothamsted Manor - Management Plan

Full Table of Content

A1 History

Rothamsted Research

Rothamsted Research (2003) *A1 History ;* The Gardens Of Rothamsted Manor - Management Plan, pp 3 - 6

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PART A SURVEY

A1 History

The following is a brief summary of the development of the Manor site. For more detailed sources, see Appendix B. Unless otherwise stated, all references can be found in the author's *'The Gardens and Landscape of Rothamsted Manor - Historical Report'* of May 2001.

Roman

Evidence has been found of pre-Roman occupation on the Rothamsted estate. The excavated footings of a Roman temple are visible near the experimental farm to the north of the Manor House, and other finds in that area suggest that the temple was associated with a walled burial site [Figs.44,45]. It is known that chalk was dug to marl the soil in Roman times.

Early manor

The earliest reference to the name and the manor of Rothamsted dates from 1212. Over the course of the following four centuries the manor passed through the hands of four families: Gubion, Nowell, Cressy and Bardolph. It is likely that the Manor House has been located on its present site since it was first established.

1623 - Sale to Wittewronges

The Bardolphs sold the property to Anne Wittewronge in 1623. The earliest documentary evidence that reveals anything of the physical form of the estate is provided by three items prepared this sale: an estate map, a sketch of the front elevation of the house, and an inventory description of the house and its immediate surroundings.

The 1623 Estate Map

The 1623 sale map [Maps 2,3] is principally a survey of the fields and woods on the estate. Names and acreages are given for each field or enclosure. The Manor House is shown set in an irregular network of fields, pastures and woods whose boundaries had probably changed little since the earliest enclosures. The house and immediate environs are left blank, but the adjacent forecourt, moat and orchard are shown. The forecourt flanks the approach to the south front, while the orchard is shown north of the house in the area of the existing walled garden. To the west of the house on the site of the current Manor Wood is the rabbit warren ('Conygre'), shown with only a scattering of trees. The principal approach to the manor is from the east, along a tree-lined route through 'The Parke' and 'The Green'.

From the 1623 Sale Description:

A prettie Courte before the house at the goeing in on the South being 30 yds square, and is paled about. Two little garden plotts lying on each side the Courte, one behind the house, on the North there is a dayrie house, a verie faire Pigeon or dovehouse, and a Well house, that goeth with a Wheele, wherein a dogg is putt, and draweth up the water. There is also a Moate that compasseth the back parte of the house, which Moate hath been verie badly used and is dryed upp and stopped in one or two places. On the North parte of the said Moate there is a prettie orchard, that is planted with young trees, and hath verie pleasant walks about the said orchard if they were well looked unto and ordered. There is a[lso] a yard on the East parte of the house whereon standeth two faire Barnes, two Stables, and a Shedd for two Horse.

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Sir John Wittewronge's changes to the estate [Map 4]

Sir John Wittewronge (1616-93) was active in the Parliamentarian cause during the Civil War, and was later a Member of Parliament during the Commonwealth. He took up residence at Rothamsted in 1639, and carried out major changes to the estate. He greatly extended the house in the late 1640's, widening the south elevation and adding a new west elevation, both of which he adorned with Dutch gables. The house as it stands today is predominantly his creation. At about the same time he extended and rationalised the existing gardens and orchard and built new garden walls to a rectilinear plan. Evidence suggests that he also walled the front court and placed gate piers at the entrance. He undertook major tree-planting including the creation of a 'New Orchard and Plantation' in the pre-existing Warren ('Conygre') west of the gardens. This incorporated many evergreen trees as was fashionable at the time. In the wider estate he established an orthogonal field pattern around the house and created a new straight avenue approach from the west.

Sir John Wittewronge's 'Diary of Weather'

During the 1680's Sir John kept a unique 'Diary of Weather' in which he recorded daily weather conditions and wind direction. This proto-scientific account provides rare meteorological information from a period before formal records were kept, and appears to prophetically prefigure the experimental work begun by his descendant and namesake 160 years later. The weather entries are accompanied with brief but fascinating commentary on aspects of estate management including crops, harvests, hay-making, brewing, livestock and gardening. There are many entries concerning the gardens, most of which are preoccupied with the cultivation of fruit and vegetables for the table, describing their flowering, fruiting and harvesting, the varieties grown, their diseases and pests, and commenting on their consumption. The 'Diary of Weather' is a valuable document on historical, cultural and scientific grounds. It was published in 1997.

Early 18th Century

Changes to the gardens were carried out in the 1720's by Jacob Wittewronge The Younger (1693-1728). In 1721 an elm avenue was planted running south from the house, apparently for 'show' rather than to mark a roadway. The existing gardens were enhanced and updated. Many new fruit trees were planted, as were a large quantity of trees for topiary. Sir John's Wittewronge's 'Plantation' on the former warren to the west of the gardens was now referred to as the 'Ffurr Grove' as a result of his evergreen plantings, and was the subject of a great deal of work. 'Wood Walks' were cleared and were lined with hornbeam hedges. It is likely that the avenue running west of the house that remains today as the 'Dirce Avenue' was cut through the wood at this time.

Later 18th Century / Early 19th Century

Little documentary evidence survives from this period. The walled front court was removed [Fig. 1], and the fields to the south and east were opened up as parkland and planted with clumps of trees. It appears that little had changed within the walled garden; the 1838 Tithe Map [Map 5] shows the house with walled enclosures to the north and extending to the west, probably as built by Sir John Wittewronge in the mid-17th Century.

Sir John Bennet Lawes

Sir John Bennet Lawes (1814-1900) took residence in 1834. He set up a laboratory in the house and began investigations on the manuring of agricultural plants, first in pots, and then in the kitchen garden and on the home farm. In 1842 he took out a patent for super-phosphate fertiliser - possibly the first ever artificial chemical fertiliser. In 1843 Sir John was joined by the distinguished scientist Sir Henry Gilbert. The Experimental Station was established and the systematic 'classical' field experiments began. By 1847 super-

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phosphate was producing good returns and providing funds to expand the experiments. For the rest of the 19th Century Lawes, Gilbert and Rothamsted's experiments were at the forefront of plant and agricultural science and enjoyed an international reputation. The nitrogen cycle and the role of the key chemical plant nutrients were first established at Rothamsted, and many other scientific breakthroughs and new agricultural techniques have arisen in the institute's work up to the present day.

Changes to the manor 1839 -1900

In the 1840's Lady Caroline Lawes, the wife of Sir John, painted views of the house from the south-west and from across the pond [Figs.2,3], showing that little had changed since the previous century. It was in the 1860's that some of the proceeds from the super-phosphate were channelled into changes to the house and gardens. In 1863, in celebration of the coming-of-age of their son Charles, the Great Drawing Room was added north of the 17th Century west front in a matching style. This necessitated parallel changes to the gardens, including demolition of the southern garden walls [compare Figs.1,2,5 with Fig.7]. The walled area was reduced by half, with formal parterres laid out in the newly opened western area. These were separated from the Manor Wood by a ha-ha. The 1st edition OS maps (surveyed 1878) [Maps 6,7] show the new form of the gardens, and paths laid out through an ornamental woodland of mixed planting. The ornamental ha-ha walls date from this period. The gardens featured in an article in the Gardeners' Chronicle in 1875, which made particular reference to a notable 'lime walk' in which overhead layering formed arched walkways between older and younger trees [Fig.6].

1900-1911 Sir Charles Lawes-Wittewronge

On his death, Sir John Bennet Lawes passed the ownership and upkeep of the experimental station to the Lawes Agricultural Trust. His son, Sir Charles Lawes Wittewronge (1843-1911), inherited the manor and gardens. He did not share his father's scientific leanings but tended towards the arts, and was an accomplished athlete and sculptor. He was interested in genealogy and heraldry, and undertook changes to the gardens in accordance with his desire to see Rothamsted as a country seat worthy of the Wittewronge pedigree. He added a large number of ornamental garden features; urns, seats, two of his own sculptures, and other embellishments, including Dutch gables to the west wall of the walled garden. The eastern and western approaches to the house were realigned, and farm buildings cleared to form the yard as it exists today [Map 8]. The avenue through the Manor Wood was formalised and replanted, and the wood extended to the west to close the avenue vista. The avenue was terminated in a circular lawn set in the extended wood, which provided the setting for Sir Charles' most ambitious sculptural group; 'The Death of Dirce' [Fig.33]. To the north of the gardens he created a formal orchard with another extension to the wood beyond it. This enclosed another circular clearing, possibly intended for another sculpture. Both these wood extensions appear to have been designed to cut off the sight of his late father's experimental fields and all reminders of worldly concerns. The resulting quality of seclusion is suggested by a contemporary account:

'*... it is delightful to walk on the velvety lawns of Rothamsted, and study the creeper-covered gables that rise along its front. The gay flower-beds, neatly inlaid in a huge carpet of green turf and sheltered by a belt of massive trees, appeal to the artistic senses and carry the imagination away from the hurly-burly of commercial life into a land where all is peace, rest, and beauty.*' (Advertiser & Times, c. 1905).

The house and garden featured in Country Life in 1906.

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1911-2002

After Sir Charles' death in 1911 the Manor House and gardens were let until 1939. The manor was requisitioned by the army during the 1939-45 war. The Rothamsted estate was bought by the Lawes Agricultural Trust in 1934 with the help of public subscription, and the house was converted into halls of residence in 1951-52.

The layout of the gardens has changed little since 1911 [Map 9], although the character of the surrounding parkland has been significantly altered as more land has been taken up for experiments. Many trees have been lost, including the scattered parkland trees and clumps. As a result, the original landscape intentions are no longer clearly discernible. The 1721 elm avenue was lost to Dutch Elm disease in the 1970's, and the last of the older limes along the western approach were lost in the storms of 1987.