

## Somerset parks and gardens after the Middle Ages: the archaeology of the formal garden, c.1540–1730

*James Bond*

Within the long time-span of human history, the grand formal garden developed under the Tudor and Stuart régimes was a late and relatively ephemeral fashion. Correspondingly, even within the 150-year-old tradition of scholarship carried out under the banner of our society whose anniversary we are currently celebrating, the archaeology of post-medieval gardens stands out as a relatively novel object of study (Bond 1998b). Admittedly, something of the history of garden design between the dissolution of the monasteries and the early eighteenth century had long been known from the evidence of contemporary descriptions, illustrations and plans. Writers such as Thomas Hill (alias Didymus Mountain), author of *The Gardener's Labyrinth*, the first edition of which was published in 1586, and William Lawson, author of *The New Orchard and Garden*, published in 1618, portrayed idealised designs for formal gardens, which typically included a formal rectangular plat or parterre containing geometrically-designed beds which could be overlooked from a terrace enclosing part or all of the perimeter, the whole being enclosed by some sort of boundary wall or fence. As formal gardens became more extensive and more elaborate, with multiple compartments and alignments being continued outwards into the surrounding park by avenues and plantations, illustrators such as Leonard Knyff and Johannes Kip depicted actual places where such gardens were created. However,

investigators who have wished to look for the reality behind the illustrations have been confronted by two major difficulties.

The first obstacle is the extent of destruction which has taken place through subsequent changes of fashion. By the 1730s a new style of landscape gardening was being pioneered by William Kent, and this was soon being imitated in Somerset by men such as Ralph Allen and his steward Richard Jones at Prior Park, James Scott working for the 5th Earl of Cork at Marston Bigot, Sir Charles Kemeys-Tynte at Halswell and Copleston Warre Bampfylde at Hestercombe. The new fashion, which eschewed geometrical patterns in favour of sinuous lines, irregular bodies of water, mixed plantations and vistas aimed at imitating nature, began to spread at the expense of the older tradition of formal grounds. Informality, and the development of a distinctively English style of landscaping, was pursued further by the most famous landscape gardener of the later eighteenth century, Lancelot “Capability” Brown; and such was his influence and his reputation for the ruthless destruction of formality that, until recently, many believed all traces of older gardens to have been obliterated beyond recall. At Marston Bigot, for example, Edmund, 7th Earl of Cork, who would have been well acquainted with Brown’s work at Longleat, just over the Wiltshire border, continued remodelling his own grounds in the same style. The transformation took many years to complete, culmi-

nating in the making of a new lake in the 1830s. As a result, it is virtually impossible now to see any evidence on the ground of the important baroque garden laid out by Stephen Switzer for the 4th and 5th Earls of Orrery between 1729 and 1739; and were it not for the illustration made by René Parr shortly after the completion of Switzer's garden and contemporary correspondence relating to it which has been examined by Michael McGarvie (1987), we would have hardly any clue to its former existence.

The second problem, ironically, is precisely the reverse of the first: continuing cultivation, where major elements of the architectural framework of the early formal garden survive, and formality has never entirely been lost; but where much of the detail, in particular the planting scheme, has been subject to a continual process of alteration. The hard landscaping of walls, revetments and terraces has tended to be more resistant to change because of the sheer effort involved in levelling them; but new planting fashions, and the increasing availability of exotic plants and hybrids offering a wider colour range and a longer flowering season, provided opportunities which not even the most conservative of gardeners could resist.

The gardens of Montacute House were lauded by several early garden historians as a supreme example of a surviving Elizabethan layout, and much of the architectural framework of the grounds, together with the raised walk around the north garden, does indeed date from the time of Sir Edward Phelips, for whom the new house was built in the 1590s. However, the present appearance of the grounds owes just as much to Mr Pridham, the gardener who accompanied Ellen Helyar from Coker Court on her marriage to William Phelips in 1845. Under Pridham's direction the internal form of the north garden was drastically altered by the planting of yew and holly and the conversion of the plat to a sunken lawn with raised oval beds in each quarter. Then, in the 1890s, the Elizabethan prospect mound was razed to make way for a balustraded lily pond. Before 1902 the east forecourt had been laid down to grass with clipped yews, flower borders and a central fountain. This fountain was itself later removed, along with the raised beds in the north garden, the lawns being correspondingly extended. Extensive further replanting took place in the 1930s, 1940s and 1970s (Dodd 1978 esp. pp. 25–6). The employment of stone obelisks on the new orangery of 1848 and

on the surround of the 1890s lily pond, in conscious imitation of the Elizabethan style, has misled many visitors as to their true date.

Elsewhere, the garden at Lytes Cary also retains its raised perimeter walk from the Elizabethan design, though this now encloses an orchard. There is a splendid Kip prospect of Brympton d'Evercy dated 1707, showing the elaborate formal gardens probably developed by Sir John Sydenham while he was extending the house in the 1660s. Some elements of the grounds depicted by Kip can still be recognised, such as the canal to the south-west, the forecourt to the west and the enclosure on the sloping ground to the north. However, the terrace below the south front of the house was rebuilt and the walks below the bowling-green were superseded by a new lake during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and further reconstruction and replanting took place in the 1920s and 1930s. At Ven House, near Milborne Port, the plans of the baroque gardens designed in the 1720s by Richard Grange for James Medlycott are known, and the outline of the south parterre with the balustraded terrace below the house survives, but a lawn with a small circular pond has replaced the mirrored part-curved beds. At Clevedon Court the great stone-walled terraces developed by Sir Abraham Elton (d.1742) behind the house and extended by his youngest son and namesake after 1761, still dominate the slope to the north; but early photographs show the parterre and terraces occupied by prim Victorian bedding, which attracted the ire of Gertude Jekyll in 1901. The current softer planting is in a style of which Miss Jekyll would surely have approved, but it bears no resemblance to anything that the eighteenth-century Eltons would have recognised. Elements of the formal layout at Nether Stowey manor house shown on a mid-eighteenth-century estate plan also survive, including the garden walls and gazebo.

However, in gardens which have remained in use it can often be a problem to determine how much of the formal components that we now see are authentic relics from an earlier past and to what extent they have been re-established or extended by later generations. The renewed interest in formality in the nineteenth century and the careful imitation of older styles of terracing, balustrading and waterworks on sites like Montacute and St Catherine's Court can, on occasion, make it quite difficult to distinguish genuine survival from later recreation.



Figure 17.1: *The garden earthworks at Low Ham from the air. To the right can be seen the church which formed part of the layout. Photo courtesy M Aston.*

It was not until the 1970s that archaeologists began to realise that quite spectacular remains of abandoned formal gardens could sometimes survive undisturbed under permanent pasture, and in consequence were still available for study by the standard range of archaeological techniques, including aerial photography, earthwork survey, geophysical investigation and excavation. The first rediscoveries of earthworks of lost formal gardens by the investigators of the RCHME, then undertaking survey work in Northamptonshire, represented an important breakthrough at national level. This was soon followed up locally by the county archaeologists of the time.

In Somerset Mick Aston undertook pioneer investigations of Hardington and Low Ham (Aston 1978), and in those parts of Somerset transferred to the new county of Avon in 1974 further surveys were initiated by Rob Iles (Edgar and Iles 1981; Iles 1985). Aston used a combination of aerial photography, fieldwork and documentary research to throw light upon the extensive earthworks of Low

Ham (Figure 17.1), postulating there two successive formal gardens on adjacent sites belonging to two vanished mansions, the first developed by Sir Edward Hext after 1588, the second by John, 2nd Lord Stawell before 1692. Iles identified and recorded garden earthworks both at Kelston, which were attached to the lost late sixteenth-century manor-house of the Haringtons, and at Claverton, where an impressive pair of gate piers flanked by walls with openwork balustrading gave access to steps up terraces to the former site of Sir Thomas Estcourt's house, sold to Sir William Bassett in 1608.

Further intensive surveys have since been undertaken in the county by Rob Wilson-North on behalf of the Royal Commission, and this has led to the reinterpretation of Low Ham and the clarification of an interesting sequence at Witham Charterhouse. At Low Ham it is now clear that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century gardens were in fact on the same alignment, Lord Stawell's uncompleted works being, in effect, a remodelling of the

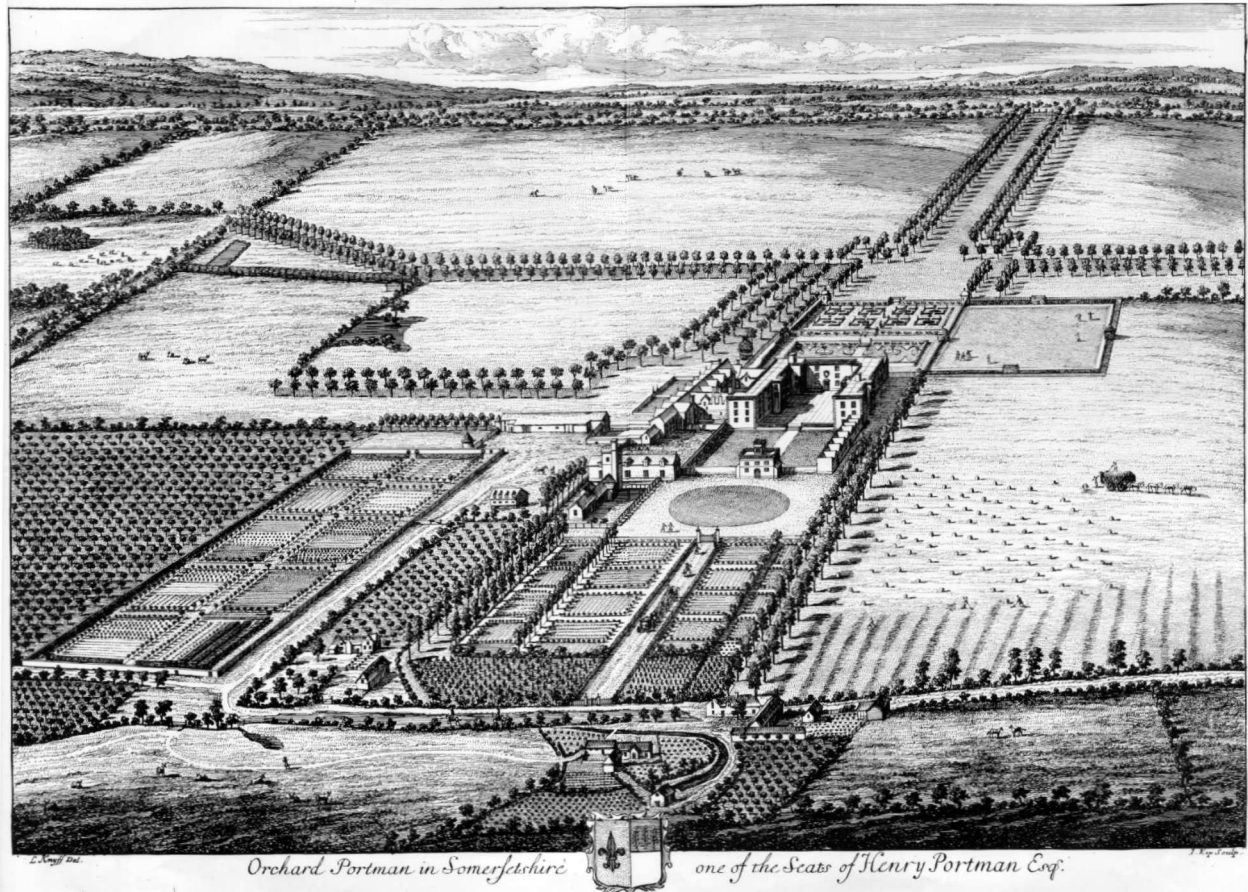


Figure 17.2: *The formal gardens and park at Orchard Portman, a 1707 engraving by Johannes Kip from a drawing by Leonard Knyff.*

central block of the Hext gardens. At Witham the Hoptons and Wyndhams developed successive mansions with gardens over the remains of the Carthusian monastery, all of which were superseded by the abortive new mansion and landscaped park designed by Robert Adam for William Beckford in the 1760s (Wilson-North 1998). On this latter site important new information has come from geophysical survey. The identification of the plan of the underlying Carthusian monastery has assisted the disentangling of the medieval remains from the earthworks of the later formal gardens, and the recognition of a regular pattern of resistance anomalies within the Great Cloister now points clearly to its use as a garden during the Hopton or Wyndham occupation. Similar results within the site of the cloister at Hinton Charterhouse suggest the post-monastic garden use of that enclosure also.

Earthworks resembling formal garden remains have also now been recognised on several sites for which no clear provenance has yet been discovered. Survey undertaken by David McOmish and

Graham Brown during the Shapwick project in 1993 identified an abandoned terrace and canal or pond in Henhills Copse, mysteriously remote from either manor-house, but unambiguously part of a garden complex, the historical context of which remains quite unknown at present. Equally mysterious is the set of terraces around two sides of a parterre discovered on the rectory estate at Over Stowey by Charles and Nancy Hollinrake in 1994. The pattern here is startlingly reminiscent of the abandoned garden at Wakerley in Northamptonshire, recorded by the Royal Commission, and apparently dated to the seventeenth century; but through a period when the rectory estate was owned by an absentee landlord (it belonged to the mayor and commonalty of Bristol from 1541 to 1820), who would have had the wealth or the motivation to undertake such a substantial operation?

Much more remains to be done. There is another Kip engraving depicting Orchard Portman (Figure 17.2), which shows an elaborate formal parterre west of the house approached across the

park by a long double avenue and subsidiary avenues, a bowling-green immediately to the north, a gravelled forecourt before the east front of the house with a round lawn, further formal gardens extending up to the present road, and large walled kitchen-gardens and extensive orchards to the south. A couple of the buildings shown by Kip, the church and the rectory, survive to provide some fixed points; and although part of the site has disappeared beneath Taunton Racecourse, enough slight terraces and lines of enclosure walls survive to suggest that much of the layout remains archaeologically intact. Other known earthworks, such as the prospect mound at Combe Florey and the terraces at Chilcompton, also have yet to be surveyed.

It is almost inevitable that attention will continue to be concentrated on the gardens of the greater landowners, for they were most exposed to wider influences, closest to the forefront of fashion and had the resources to indulge their tastes to the most elaborate degree. However, far more important numerically were the imitations of the greater formal gardens by men of lesser means lower down the social scale. The portrayal of farmhouse gardens of the early seventeenth century on a painted panel over a fireplace at Charity Farm, Lovington and on a 1718 estate plan of Roughmoor Farm at Bishop's Hull are of special interest (Figure 17.3). Innate conservatism and more limited financial resources meant that changes in such gardens would normally occur more slowly, the process being one of adaptation rather than transformation. In the same way town gardens, because of their restricted space, rarely lent themselves to the landscape style, and eighteenth-century town plans such as those of Wells by William Simes (1735) and Bath by Charles Harcourt Masters (1787 and 1794–5) show formal gardens lingering on. The archaeological potential of such sites has been well illustrated by the excavation in 1984–6 and subsequent restoration of the Georgian garden at 4 The Circus, Bath (Bell, R D 1990).

The conventional belief of past years that the landscape gardeners of the eighteenth century had swept away all traces of the formal gardens of their predecessors can no longer be sustained. It is now clear that a considerable body of archaeological evidence survives to complement, and at times to correct, what is known from the documentary record. However, current pressures upon land use mean that there can be no guarantees of the long-term survival of that evidence, and further survey remains a necessary

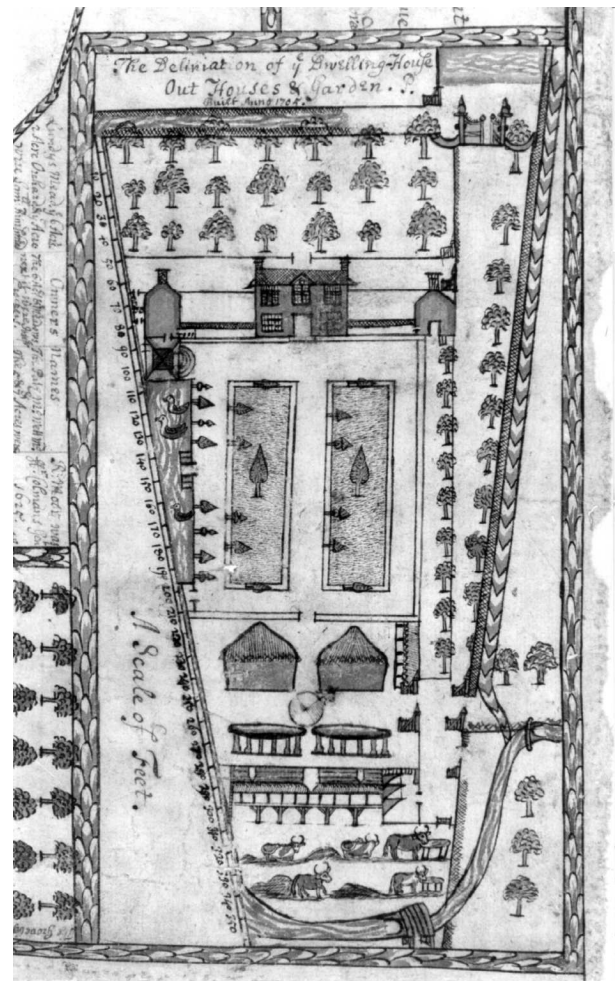


Figure 17.3: *Roughmoor Farm, Bishop's Hull on a plan of 1718 showing the small formal garden and orchard adjoining the farm house with the rickyard beyond (Somerset Record Office DD/CH, Bishops Hull, 1718)*

prelude to evaluation and selective, more intensive, investigation.