

Hannaford House: a Garden Divided

Fiona Senior

In the summer of 2005 my husband and I moved our family to the dilapidated half of an Arts and Crafts style Edwardian manor house near Ashburton on the edge of Dartmoor. It is called Hannaford House and reading the sale details was the first time I had heard the name Thomas Mawson; I knew nothing of garden history and had pretty average gardening experience.

The garden was overgrown and in need of significant restoration, though it had a 'Secret Garden' charm to it as we pushed our way through thirty foot high laurels to find new parts of the garden and balanced precariously on the twenty foot high retaining wall to the lower lawn so that we could see the views over the river Dart valley hidden by a six foot high box hedge. The task of restoring it, whilst making it work for us as a family garden, was a daunting one.

The first issue to address was not planting, but understanding the garden and its history. In this I had two great strokes of luck. The first was that Paula Kemp, who had worked in the garden for over fifteen years, initially alongside its previous owner Dr. George Tee and latterly as the main gardener, was keen to stay on and help. Paula knows the garden better than anyone else. The other piece of luck was that a close friend's husband is Professor Timothy Mowl of Bristol University. Professor Mowl visited the garden early on and then asked his MA student, Sue Thompson, to write a Conservation Report on it. This was immensely helpful and played an important part in helping me understand some of the odd aspects of the garden.

The most important consideration in looking at our garden and planning its restoration and future development is that we only have half a garden. Hannaford Manor, as the whole house was originally called, was built for Major W.E.T. Bolitho, a member of the Cornish banking family, at the turn of the twentieth century. Local legend has it that he wanted to buy Spitchwick Manor, but failed and so decided to build his own manor house. It was intended to be a family holiday home. The house was finished in 1904; and in 1906 Thomas Mawson was asked to design the garden which covered some thirty acres. His rather better-known Devon garden at Wood, South Tawton, had been completed the previous year and there are some similarities in the two designs. Both gardens are on sloping sites and at both Mawson made use of the local granite for the retaining walls, for example.

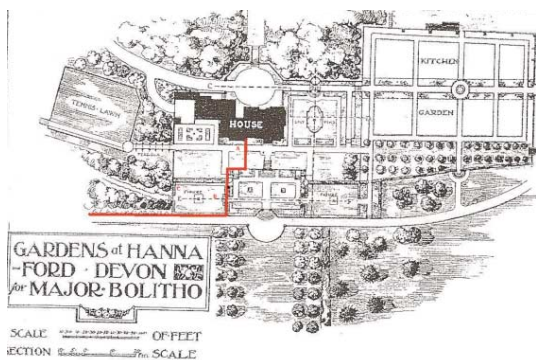
As the house had been set too far back on the plot to take advantage of the views down towards the river Dart, Thomas Mawson cut away and terraced the ground immediately in front of the house. The site also slopes downwards from east to west so the terracing steps down across the front of the house as well as from it. In his *Life and Work of an English Landscape Architect* (1927) he said:

My commission at Hannaford was the designing of a formal lay-out for the terracing of the immediate surroundings of his (Major Bolitho's) new residence; but while the scheme was formal in plan, the rough moss-grown granite of the walls, and the thousands of alpine plants inserted into them, gave the whole an informal appearance as delightful as it was unique.¹

Sadly there is no trace today of the thousands of alpine plants. An illustration of the layout by Mawson appears in *Devon Gardens - an Historical Survey*, edited by Stephen Pugsley.² The eventual layout of the garden differs in a few ways, for example the pond is sited in a different lawn and the pergola shown to the west of the house was never built, but the core terracing remains as shown.

In the 1950's Hannaford Manor nearly shared the fate of a number of English country houses and their gardens. It was bought by two builders from Torquay with the intention of pulling it down and developing the site. Thankfully a Preservation Order was put on it at the last minute, the house was listed and therefore saved. It was then split into two, as it is today. The split runs north to south. Most of the formal rooms remained with Hannaford Manor and the renamed Hannaford House comprised the dining room and smoking room on the ground floor plus the bedrooms above and the service wing and outbuildings on the western end of the building. The garden was also divided in two. Hannaford Manor retained most of the formal gardens in front of the house plus the kitchen garden, the arboretum behind the house, the driveway and additional lawns and garden to the east of the house. Hannaford House has about an acre of garden comprising the western upper and lower terracing, the tennis lawn and surrounding area, and the woodland area at the eastern end of the garden which is not shown on the published plan. In addition the carriage drive and its original garden went to Hannaford Old House, at the end of the drive.

This division of the garden was done by following the boundaries between terraces created by Mawson everywhere except immediately by the house. There it cuts across the main path along the front of the house and then across a lawn to the line of granite balustrading that runs along the southern edge of the terrace, as shown in the plan below.



Mawson's 1907 plan of the garden, with the C20 division superimposed.

One of the first issues created by the division of the garden

we needed to address was the lack of parking space. The original entrance to our side of the garden was the 'tradesman's entrance' leading to the thatched courtyard at the end of the service wing of the house. There was no need then for extensive parking. The drive had been extended to provide one parking space and a garage added to the side of the courtyard, but this was insufficient for a modern day family. We took the decision to grit our teeth and create one sensible sized parking area in front of the garage cutting slightly into the tennis lawn to the west. Given the formal and geometric design of the garden, we made this an oblong shape with a small semi-circle along the edge leading into the tennis lawn. This entailed moving a number of mature rhododendrons and a *Magnolia stellata* so this was my first experience of

gardening by JCB. Surprisingly most of the plants we moved have survived.

The most obvious result of splitting the garden was that a wall was built across the main path and the first terrace to separate the two halves at the front of the house (see point A on the plan). Another wall was built across the top of a flight of steps leading up to our part of the garden from the middle lower terrace. Whilst providing privacy and creating a new boundary, these new walls cut across original sightlines and block off intended accesses leaving the steps, in particular, marooned with no purpose.



Looking east across the front of the house to the wall built between the two halves of the garden (Fiona Senior)

Moving down to the lower terrace, a boundary had to be created between our lower lawn and Hannaford Manor's garden. A set of granite half-moon steps lead down to this lawn at point B on the plan and a low wall was built across them. A tall box hedge grew on top of this low retaining wall and in recent years a climber-covered arbour on the Hannaford

Manor side of the wall also blocked the view from one garden into the other.

Lower lawn boundary with arbour and box hedge in place (Fiona Senior)



Last autumn the arbour collapsed and was taken down. At the same time one side of the box

hedge was pruned back to ground level, as it had suffered serious die-back. This has temporarily opened up the original view from west to east across the three lower terraces and has given us the opportunity to see this aspect of the garden as it was originally intended, albeit at the price of a loss of privacy. A new arbour will be put in place later this year.



Boundary on lower lawn with arbour removed and box hedge pruned back (Fiona Senior)

The separation of the two sides of the garden blocked off the access to this

lower lawn. There are steps further west along the garden (not shown on Mawson's plan), but it was no longer possible to walk directly from the terrace at the front of the house down to

the lower lawn. This problem was complicated by a rockery bed that sloped down between the upper and lower terraces.

At some point, probably not long after the house was divided, a set of steps had been set into the rockery (point C on the plan). They utilise the retaining wall at the bottom of the rockery as a step and then separate to provide access to the lawn on one side and to the paved area leading to the woodland garden on the other. The steps are made of breeze block and curve outwards in an attempt to mimic Mawson's style elsewhere in the garden. Barley twists have been set on the steps to add impact. Professor Mowl's view was that we should take these steps out and re-instate the full length of the rockery, but we have decided that the practical need for them outweighs the historical niceties in this case. We let moss grow on them to disguise their construction as much as possible.



The new steps from the house to the lower lawn (Fiona Senior)

A box hedge runs all the way around the lower lawn, an original planting shown on the plan, and the steps divide around the end of this hedge. This leaves a dangerous drop where the steps separate, exacerbated by a significant amount of die-back at the end of the hedge. Our initial thought was to dig out the end of the hedge and put in a set of half moon steps where the current steps part. This would not only be safer, but would also echo the half moon steps at the end of the lawn leading into Hannaford Manor's garden. Subsequently however, we changed our minds as the box hedging is such a key feature of this lawn; and we have simply planted new box in the gaps left by the die-back to re-establish the hedge more fully.

There are a number of other challenges to the garden that are the result of its many changes of ownership since Thomas Mawson laid it out. These reflect different owner's needs and personal preferences. Some, such as the previous owner's desire for privacy, have been easy to address. Others, such as a 1960's or 1970's use of concrete and paving slabs between the formal terraces and the woodland garden are going to have to wait their turn.



Looking east from the woodland garden over the concreted area towards the lower lawn. Note the dovecot which is built at the corner of the retaining wall for the lower lawn. It is not shown on Mawson's original plan (Fiona Senior)

Getting to know the garden has been, and continues to be, a fascinating process. Taking its restoration slowly, to fit around our other commitments, has been beneficial and has prevented us taking several decisions we would now regret. Over the four years we have lived with our half of a Mawson garden we have developed a strong sense of being custodians of a garden with a significant history. We want to protect that history whilst leaving a positive mark on its future and to enjoy returning it to its original purpose - a family garden.

References

1. Thomas H. Mawson, *The Life and Work of an English Landscape Architect, an Autobiography*, London, 1927.
2. Steven Pugsley, *Devon Gardens: an Historical Survey*, Stroud, 1994, p. 109

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