

Another Brick in the Wall? Restoration or Decay: the State of Walled Gardens in Devon Today.

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Typical of surviving glasshouses in Devon: a glasshouse at Bicton (Kim Auston)

This article focuses on walled gardens of the type generally known as kitchen gardens. A useful description of this sort of garden can be found in Jane Loudon's *Instructions in Gardening for Ladies*, 1840:

*In almost all gardens, it is customary to set apart a portion of ground for the culture of culinary vegetables; and in villas and country seats, this portion is quite detached from the pleasure-ground, and is called the kitchen garden. When this is the case, it usually consists of a square or oblong piece of ground, varying from one to five acres in extent, according to the size of the establishment, and inclosed (sic) by a wall ten or twelve feet high...In front of the wall is a border for the roots of the fruit trees ten or twelve feet wide, and beyond that a walk usually four feet wide, leaving a plot of ground in the centre for the culture of culinary vegetables and espalier fruit trees.*¹

What Jane Loudon fails to mention in her otherwise admirable description is the plethora of glasshouses that were required for a fully functioning kitchen garden, together with the back ranges consisting of boiler houses, mushroom houses, tool sheds, potting sheds, fruit stores, bothies and so on.

In the mid-nineteenth century there was a large number of relatively small firms engaged in glasshouse construction and the related business of supplying heating systems. In its issues of January 1841, for example, *The Gardeners' Chronicle* contained announcements from a diverse group of manufacturers including D. & E. Bailey of Holborn ('the first to introduce metallic curvilinear houses to horticulturists'), and T. Corbett of Pencarrow, Bodmin, who was proud to announce that 'he has patented his system of heating horticultural buildings'.² Among the few Devon firms active in this market

was the Exeter-based nurserymen, Lucombe, Pince & Co, who stated in their catalogues that they could produce plans for conservatories, greenhouses, hothouses and even Wardian cases.³

However, on many estates the 'houses' required for cultivation would have been designed and fabricated by estate staff. For example, when the Parkers of Saltram decided to build an elegant greenhouse (the building now known as the Orangery) they commissioned a plan from Nathaniel Richmond, the landscape gardener, which was then 'improved' by the estate carpenter, Stockman.⁴

By the end of the nineteenth century a small number of firms had come to dominate the market, including Foster & Pearson, Messenger, Boulton & Paul and Skinner & Board. The Messenger archive records vineries, plant houses, peach houses, conservatories, tomato houses and forcing houses being delivered to a range of properties in Devon. Although some, like Castle Hill, were seats of the aristocracy, many of the addresses to which the glasshouses were delivered were really quite modest.⁵ This would tend to support the findings of a recent English Heritage study, which shows that the majority of walled gardens in nineteenth century England were, in fact, associated with middle class villas.⁶

Whatever their size, walled gardens were once hugely productive places. Devon is lucky to have an outstanding series of accounts for the kitchen gardens at Powderham from the early nineteenth century. These record at least thirteen varieties of apple, ten varieties of pear, six plums, five cherries as well as damsons, greengages, peaches, apricots, nectarines, mulberries and pineapples. The variety of vegetables grown was equally impressive.⁷

There are many well-rehearsed reasons why walled gardens fell into decline: technological advances in refrigeration; the cost of labour; and the upkeep of garden buildings are most often cited. Certainly walled kitchen gardens were very demanding of labour. A late 19th century photograph taken at Audley End house in Essex depicts a team of 19 gardening staff;⁸ and accounts for the productive gardens at Powderham show that in 1800 the Earl of Devon felt it necessary to employ a kitchen gardener and a botanic gardener in addition to his team of regular garden labourers.

For an insight into the running costs of walled gardens today, Jim Buckland of West Dean in Sussex, estimates that his impressive collection of Foster & Pearson glasshouses costs between £20,000 and £35,000 a year to maintain (repairing and painting), with a further £6000 - £8500 being spent on oil for heating. These are huge overheads and they do not take into account the three permanent staff and approximately 15 volunteers required to manage the gardens.⁹ Closer to home, a single storm in December 2006 took out about 100 panes of glass in the walled gardens at Flete, all of which had to be replaced.¹⁰

Because of these unfavourable economics, there is a general perception that many walled gardens have been lost to development; a second perception is that those walled kitchen gardens that do survive are no longer in productive use; thirdly, that their assemblage of glasshouses, bothies, boiler houses and associated buildings have disappeared. It is the purpose of the remainder of this article to test these perceptions in relation to a small sample of walled gardens in Devon.

The sample of sites

The study is limited in its scope and ambition. To begin with, it is a desk-based study, supplemented where possible by personal knowledge. It uses the evidence of historic Ordnance

Survey maps and recent aerial photographs to give a crude indication of change. The dataset is a small one and is limited to those historic parks and gardens in Devon that appear on the Register of Parks and Gardens, but excludes sites that were designed for a public or institutional use such as cemeteries and public parks.

Do the walls that enclosed a walled garden generally survive?

By reference to the Ordnance Survey first and second editions (approximately 1884 - 1906), it was found that there were 35 private estates on the Register of Parks and Gardens with walled kitchen gardens. By comparing the historic maps with recent aerial photographs it appears that the boundaries of 29 walled gardens survive pretty much intact and the remaining six survive in part. None has disappeared entirely. Of course, it is not always possible to tell from air photographs if the original walls survive, or if one is looking at a replacement boundary. In these cases personal knowledge and reference to the survival of walled gardens in the Register descriptions has been useful. However, a full picture will only emerge from a site survey, which is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it can be said with some confidence that not one of the 35 walled gardens examined has entirely disappeared over the past century i.e. since c.1906, a finding that is at odds with the widely held perception that we have lost most of our walled gardens.

Are walled gardens still productive?

If the apparent survival of the walls that define walled gardens in Devon is heartening, the answer to the second question posed, concerning the number of walled gardens still in productive use, is less encouraging.

Of the 35 walled gardens in the sample, three have been identified as having been completely built over: Saltram on the edge of Plymouth; Watcombe, in Torbay; and Lindridge Park near Newton Abbot. There are, additionally, a number of walled gardens which have experienced small-scale development. The Register description for Langdon Court near Modbury, for example, refers to a late 20th century bungalow within the walled garden complex.¹¹ There is also limited development in the walled gardens at Lupton, Castle Hill, Mamhead and Stover, and we understand that the walled garden, at Rousdon in East Devon, currently has planning permission for two dwellings.



Houses constructed in the walled garden at Saltram Park (Kim Auston)

At the other end of the scale the study has identified just three walled gardens that are being gardened in a manner that evokes their former use. Pre-eminent among them is the restoration of the Burges-designed walled garden at Knightshayes near Tiverton.



The Walled Garden at Knightsshayes under restoration. (Kim Auston)



Foster and Pearson glasshouse at Flete (Kim Auston)



The Walled Garden at Knightsshayes after restoration (Kim Auston)



The completed vinery at Greenway (Kim Auston)

At Arlington in North Devon, another National Trust property, the kitchen garden is similarly being gradually restored. Finally, with little brouhaha, the community at Tapeley Park near Barnstaple is quietly continuing to cultivate the walled garden there.

However, slightly more than half of the walled gardens in this study appear to be managed in a way that, if not as originally intended, at least retains a horticultural or quasi-horticultural function. At Dartington some of the old nursery standing beds are still in use;¹² at Sharpham, near Totnes, modern greenhouses stand on historic bases, thereby continuing the horticultural tradition; at Bicton College, East Devon, the walled gardens are now used as a teaching resource; at Flete near Plymouth the walled gardens are being managed by a plantsman; and the walled garden at Endsleigh, West Devon, is operating as a garden centre. Other walled gardens in this 'quasi horticultural' group appear simply to have been grassed over, as at Youlston in North Devon, Bridwell in Mid Devon, Rockbears in East Devon and Mamhead in Teignbridge. Some of these grassed-over walled gardens are used as private gardens, ancillary to a private dwelling but others like Wood near South Tawton have effectively been abandoned.

What has happened to the bothies, glasshouses and 'back' ranges?

Of the 35 walled gardens examined, 20 (57%) appear to have lost most or all of their historic glasshouses. In fact only three sites have been identified where the glasshouse ranges recorded as being present c.1906 appear to remain substantially intact today: Greenway, Flete and Wood. At Greenway the National Trust has spent just under £150,000 on the restoration of a single vinery.¹³ At privately-owned Flete, there is a range of Foster & Pearson glasshouses, together with a boiler house containing the original 'Robin Hood' boiler, potting sheds and a fruit store. Wood, near South Tawton, also has the full complement of glasshouses and structures mapped in 1906, but these are at serious risk of collapse.

This snapshot of the survival of glasshouses and the associated buildings in walled gardens needs to be treated with caution. It is quite easy to identify from an aerial photograph where a building has disappeared, but it is not possible to know where a building has been demolished and replaced with another building on the same footprint. Because of this, we would suggest that the loss of historic glasshouses and ranges is likely to be greater than this study suggests. Once again, this is an area where site investigation to corroborate the initial findings is needed.

Conclusions

This study is inevitably partial and incomplete, and it has no greater aim than to take a first, tentative step towards identifying broad trends about what is happening to walled gardens of Devon.

The study has been limited to a small and highly selective group of just 35 historic walled gardens drawn from the Register of Parks and Gardens. Since the Register affords some level of protection and is often associated with listed buildings, a working hypothesis is that this sample of Devon sites represents a 'best case' scenario. It is likely that walled gardens have fared less well where there is little or no form of statutory protection.

However, within the limitations of the study, we have found that the walls of all the 35 gardens examined survive in whole or in part. At the same time, we have found only three walled gardens (i.e. fewer than ten percent) that are being gardened as originally intended. Coincidentally the same proportion of walled gardens has been completely built over (even though the enclosing walls survive). The remainder of the walled gardens in the study must therefore be considered to be actually or potentially 'at risk', especially where some form of development has already been permitted. Finally, we have found that more than half the historic (i.e. present c.1906) glasshouses in Devon have been lost. Because of the limitations of a desk-top study, it has not been possible to reach any conclusions about the survival of related structures such as boiler houses, bothies, mushroom houses and fruit stores. This will require future site survey.

This is a potentially huge subject area and one which, because of its county-wide membership, the Devon Gardens Trust is well placed to investigate further.

References

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