

Rousdon

John Clark, Conservation Officer, Devon Gardens Trust
& Garden History Society SW Region



Rousdon, from *The Building News*
(Cherry and Pevsner, *Buildings of England, Devon*)

Rousdon, some three miles east of Lyme Regis, was created by H.W. Peek as a model Victorian estate with a large mansion set in 100 hectares of parkland. The estate was occupied by Allhallows School for 70 years, and is currently being restored to its original glory by a well-intentioned developer.

Henry William Peek (1825-98) was the son of James Peek of Watcombe, near Torquay, who made his fortune by importing tea. After he inherited his father's business, Henry rapidly expanded it into groceries, and founded the famous Peek Frean Biscuits factory. In 1868, when he became MP for the mid-Surrey constituency, he bought the Rousdon estate. A few years later, he commissioned the architect Ernest George (1839-1922), of George & Vaughan, later George & Peto, to design his mansion and the estate buildings. First of all, he built a church, in 1872, to replace the ruined village chapel. The estate was conceived as an architectural entity with a mansion on the grand scale, three lodges, a farm, stable courtyard, a summer house, a water tower, a pumping station, an engineer's cottage and a large walled kitchen garden.

On the main road, just beyond the entrance, Peek provided a village school. Gardens were created to the south, east and west of the mansion, surrounded by parkland and bounded by a belt of trees. Along the steeply wooded Rousdon Cliffs, a network of paths was created to lead down to the beach.



Outbuildings at Rousdon (John Clark)

In 1938, the Rousdon estate was bought by Allhallows School, and the mansion and the estate buildings were converted and partly extended. From the mid-twentieth century new school buildings were added, much to the detriment of the setting of the original buildings and the historic landscape. Hard surfaced tennis courts and sports pitches were constructed in the walled kitchen garden. The school closed in 1999.

Aware that the estate was likely to be sold for development, English Heritage added Rousdon to the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest. East Devon District Council also acted quickly and decisively. Kate Little, Head of Planning and Countryside Services, decided that the local planning authority needed to be one step ahead of the developer, and with Michael Stocks, the Conservation Officer, prepared a Planning and Design Brief to provide guidelines for the development of the Estate. The Brief required the removal of all the twentieth century school buildings and the restoration of original landscape features, including the walled kitchen garden where two new houses would facilitate this.

The Brief indicated two main areas where new residential development would be allowed. The amount of new housing was based on the floor area of the school buildings to be demolished, which equates to 100 new dwellings; a novel but somewhat unorthodox method of calculating 'enabling development'. They also required the developer to commission a Management Plan for the Estate, which was prepared by Nicholas Pearson Associates of Bath and Tiverton in 2001.

The estate was sold in lots at auction. Most of the estate was built by Morrishes of Poole for a local developer, Charles Burnett-Hitchcock of Topsham, Devon. Surprisingly, there appears to have been no legal agreement to limit the amount of development or to require the maintenance of the estate in the future. Perhaps inevitably, the developer looked for additional land for new housing and in 2004 submitted four planning applications. The Garden History Society, The Victorian Society and the Devon Gardens Trust all objected as the sites were not allocated for development in the Brief; and, to the credit of the Council, the four planning applications were refused permission.

The walled kitchen garden, with its impressive buttressed stone walls with two belvedere pavilions on the southern side, is perhaps the most magnificent one is ever likely to see. The

impression from the south side, looking east towards the sea, is reminiscent of a medieval walled town. In view of the sensitive nature of the site, The Devon Gardens Trust & the Garden History Society advised that the highest possible standard of design should be required for the two new houses.

Unfortunately, the Council has approved a design which will miss the opportunity to build an exciting modern building of the twenty-first century. As the houses have yet to be built, it may not be too late for the developer to reconsider the design.

Major improvements have been made to Rousdon since 2000. All the school buildings have been demolished, remaining buildings have been converted, and most of the 100 new houses have been built, sold and occupied. Rousdon is now in multiple ownership, with the estate managed by The Rousdon Estate Management Company Ltd, which is owned by the developer. The overall standard of the new development is high. The new houses on the drive leading to the East Lodge are more reminiscent of the Surrey stockbroker belt than rural Devon, but screened from view as one approaches the historic mansion, they are a great improvement on the school buildings which previously occupied the site.



The belvederes and buttressed walls of the walled garden (John Clarke)

Rousdon is a good example of how the use of clear guidelines by the District Council and a sympathetic developer can achieve significant improvements to an historic landscape. Both are to be congratulated. As a recent visitor wrote, 'We went to Rousdon & walked around the estate & walled garden... lovely site with wonderful corner buildings... well worth a detour'.