An Examination of the Gardens at Langdon Court

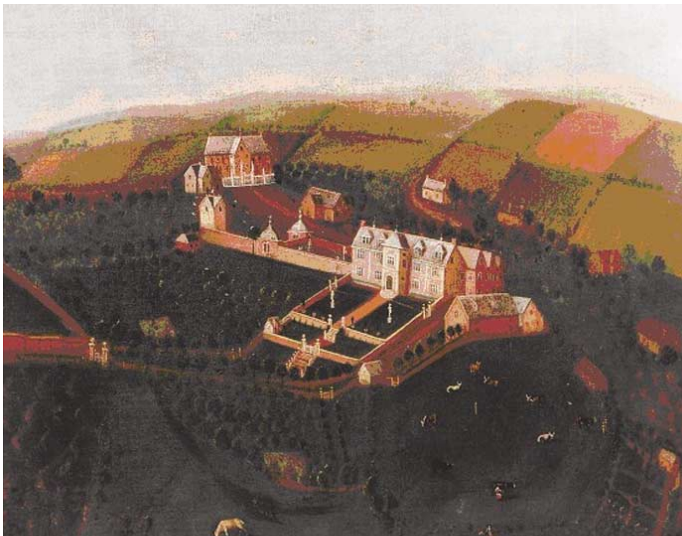
Susi Batty (Based on an article first published in (*Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, Vol 26, No.3, July - Sept 2006)

Anonymous painting of Langdon Court, c. 1707, oil on panel, 63.5 x 141.5 cms

Langdon Court, the seat of the Calmadys for three centuries, lies in a sheltered combe above the River Yealm in south Devon. The house was built in 1577 by Vincent Calmady, a Devon lawyer, but extensively reworked in 1707 by his

great-grandson, Josias. A wealthy and influential man, Josias was M.P. for Okehampton from 1679-80, High Sheriff of Devon from 1694-95, and Deputy Lieutenant from 1701-14; and both the house and garden flourished under his ownership. Langdon Court is now an hotel, its grounds reduced from two thousand acres to ten.

An exceptionally rich seam of archive material survives on Langdon Court to demonstrate that the C18 estate was both large and, for the county, lavishly designed. This article will look primarily at three items: a painting of Langdon Court, the gardens and the wider landscape (c.1707),[1] an anonymous poem, *The Country Seat*, or *A Description of Langdon* (1715)],[2] and the 1790 maps for the Calmady estates;[3] supplemented by information from the gardener's thirty year lease (1780) made between Warwick Calmady and Roger Williams.[4]



Detail of the anonymous painting of Langdon Court, c.1707

Detail of Langdon Court Estate Map, 1788-89

Using information from these it has been possible to decipher the fragmented landscape of the C21 and unravel much of what was present in the early garden. The painting, anonymous but probably executed by a peripatetic artist, is crammed with details; and, although the perspective is awkward and not a true rendition of the landscape, has considerable naïve charm. The lengthy poem contains much real information about the garden buried within its cumbersome iambic pentameters. It fits into the genre of country house and garden instruction poems (frequently sycophantic and of doubtful literary merit) common in the C17 and C18 [5]. The hand-coloured map for Langdon Court illustrates the precise layout of the estate.

Looking first at the painting, the eye is drawn by the line of the carriage drive to the house as the dominant feature, poised above terraced gardens which are exceedingly well-stocked with statuary and garden buildings. Around it are a large, walled kitchen garden, several substantial fishponds and a sizeable walled rabbit warren. The formal terraces around the house have now largely disappeared under dispiriting tarmac and the original approach to the house has also been lost: in the C18 this swept through the woods to the east (identified as 'The Grove' on the estate map), through grand pillars to reveal the house. This contrived first view of the mansion and the brick-walled formal gardens on the eastern slope below the house (called the 'Green Court' and the 'Flower Garden' in the gardener's lease) would have been impressive. Now the element of surprise is lost. Deprived of their intended significance, the forlorn pillars seem only to mark the beginning of an informal woodland walk; and the house is approached from the opposite direction, the new drive cutting savagely through both the main terrace of the Green Court and the first terrace of the formal garden to the south of the house.

The poem also emphasises the commanding position of the house and describes the ascent through the garden:

To the gay Fabrick as your Course you bend,
Five gradual risings you first ascend,
Th'approach, advancing thus by slow degrees,
Serves too for Ornaments as well as Ease.

This concept is very much that advocated by John Worlidge in *Systema Horticultura* (1683):

If your Ground you intend for a Garden, lye on the side of a Hill, your Walks may be made the one above the other, and be as Terraces the one to the other; the declining sides of them, being either of Grass or planted with fruit. If your House stand on the side of a Hill, and you must make your garden either above or below it, then make your Garden below it, for it is much more pleasant to view a Garden under the Eye than above it, and to descend into a Garden and ascend to a House, than on the contrary. [6]

The painting shows only three terraces within a brick-walled garden; by the 1795 survey map [7] these dividing walls have gone, leaving a single large enclosure with a thin central path. The first flight of steps leads through a white painted gate to the middle terrace, or Flower Garden, which contains formal planting and a small garden building set into one corner. Its exact function is unclear but from it there would have been views both to the south-east over the orchard and the rectangular pool in the 'Fir Garden' (visible in the painting) to the belvedere on the hill and to the north along the width of the terrace, across the old deerpark, to the furthest formal garden and the fishponds. The uppermost terrace, the Green Court, is the largest and the most ornate; it is bisected longitudinally by a gravel path, and gates in the side walls give onto the drive on one side and the orchard on the other. The gardener's lease provides a few tantalising details of the lost Green Court and Flower Gardens, mentioning 'Borders on Each Side of the Porch in the Green Court and likewise the Flower Garden next below the same' and binding Roger Williams to 'keep the Green Court next the Porch Way properly mowed and rolled yearly and not break up the same during the Term'. The borders and the lawn in the Green Court are identifiable in the painting. A disappointingly brief planting list amendment to the lease [8] cites cherry and apple trees in the Green Court.

Two tall statues are depicted in the centre of both lawns, defining the formal east front, although a footnote in the Langdon poem suggests that originally they were placed closer to the house: 'Another Statue confronting the former, both

standing at the entry into the House'. We know from the poem that these were of Lucretia, representing chastity, and Mercury, the winged messenger of the gods:

In Statue, chast Lucretia here, distrest,
The guilty Sword still plunges in her Breast.
Oh! Mercury, no wonder here thou stayst,
And thy return to Jove delayst.

There may have been a hidden message in the choice of these statues, chosen to guard the entrance to the house: Lucretia's rape and subsequent suicide provoked an uprising against the Tarquins; and Mercury, a frequent and complex iconographic figure, was not only a swift, winged messenger, but also a harbinger of good luck, a guardian of travellers, and the personification of eloquence (as well as a thief). Whilst we should beware of over-interpreting the iconographic sub-text, it is possible that Josias Calmady, whose father had died fighting for the Parliamentarians, may have been slightly mischievous in his choice of subjects.

From the uppermost terrace there are expansive views over the estate and the wider landscape. The painting deliberately locates the house and gardens in this wider setting, a prosperous landscape of well-tended fields and thickly planted woods. The arcadian sense of peace and abundance both indulges the owner and leaves the viewer in no doubt of the Calmadys' social and economic importance. White doves flutter from a dovecote, contented livestock browse in the fields attended by a milkmaid, and an elegant fisherman languidly extends his rod towards a rectangular pool in the foreground. Several cottages, three small houses and two large barns attend the main house, further confirming the impression of a thriving, self-contained, but hierarchical, community. The lower barn has now gone, but the distinctive, ornamental barn on the small hill above the house, rendered literally 'larger than life' by crude perspective, remains.

It is to the south side of the house where most of the older garden can be found today. Two impressive double pairs of square, C17 granite ashlar gate piers with pyramidal obelisk tops guard both ends of the south front of the house. A central flight of seven shallow steps leads to a quite remarkable survival: an enchanting late C17 or early C18 brick-walled, formal, terraced garden, described in the gardener's lease as 'The Gardens before the Parlour Windows of the Dwelling House there commonly called the Fountain Garden'. The first, and largest, terrace contains a central stone pool and a pair of exquisite gazebos; axial steps lead up to two further smaller terraces and a woodland garden beyond.

The double gate piers (Susi Batty)

Intimate and close to the mansion, much of this part of the garden has survived relatively intact; and in this elegant space it is still possible to imagine C18 century quotidian life. It feels correct, even though little of the planting is in any way original (the tea-cup shaped clipped yews which are such a feature of the garden today are probably C19, for example) and the splendid double pairs of gate piers were probably originally sited elsewhere.[9]
In the painting we catch a glimpse over the wall of sections of mown turf and gravel walks punctuated with formally placed statues. The 1795 survey map, the 1840 tithe map and the 1887 Ordnance Survey map all depict the space divided into four with a central pool.

The Fountain Court (Susi Batty)

The granite-edged oval pool was originally presided over by a fountain and statue of Cupid:

... the God of Love;
See in the Fountain there, the am'rous Blade,
With frequent bathing cools his leach'rous Head,
Ne'er thinks of Love again;

A footnote to the poem reads: 'In the middle of the Garden stands a Fountain with the Statue of a Boy in it, who whenever the Fountain Plays spouts his head'.

Four statues are shown here in the painting, placed in the quarters of the rectangular space. In leaden verse the poem makes it clear that the Fountain Court was seen to best advantage from the parlour window overlooking the garden and identifies the statues:

Look through the Window you'll a Garden see,
And in it read a Tragick-History;
The Hero Perseus in Effigie lives,
Andromedea with endless sorrow grieves,
Chear up, fair Nymph, nor of hard Fate complain,
To your Relief appears a valiant Swain;
But oh! She's done! She's wept herself adry,

More Tears, there's left no Matter to supply.
This Scene of Woe wou'd ev'n Medusa move . . .
Here Janus too more naturally shines,
Than in bright Ovid's all expressive lines.

Perseus, one of the sons of Jupiter and founder of the city of Mycenae, slew the Gorgon, Medusa, and rescued Andromeda. Janus, the two-headed doorkeeper of heaven, who faced both ways, symbolising knowledge of both the past and the future, was a significant deity, second only to Jupiter. He presided over the sowing of crops; and in ancient Rome statues of his head were often placed on pillars as guardians marking property boundaries. Here, of course, the statue is inside the garden, but the associations are apt. The fourth statue was Vulcan, the lame and ugly god of fire and war. Poor choleric Vulcan, sleeping with his constantly unfaithful wife, Venus, found temporary peace in the tranquil garden at Langdon: '*drowsy Vulcan in a tame repose/Clasps in his tawny Arms, his beauteous Spouse*'.

These statues would have been expensive [10] and we can only speculate about Josias Calmady's choice of subject; but John Worlidge provides us with some interesting contemporary reflections on the use of statuary in gardens:

[Here to] recompense the loss of past pleasures, and to buoy up hopes of another Spring, many have placed in their Gardens, Statues, and Figures of several Animals, and a great variety of other curious pieces of Workmanship, that their walks might be pleasant at any time in those places of never dying pleasures. Herein the ancient Romans were excessively prodigal, sparing of no cost, to adorn their avenues with curious figures for their Winter diversions . . . But what great pity is it that in many

places remote from Cities and great Towns, these Statues drive out of their view, those natural beauties that so far exceed them?
Much more ornamental are Statues placed in Groves and Shades, and in or near your borders of the choicest Plants than on the naked surface of the Earth, which beget not that surprise in the Spectators as the other.
Statues are commendable in the midst of Fountains, and Green Squares, in Groves and at the end of obscure walks.[11]

Without the statues the Fountain Court is dominated today by a charming pair of brick gazebos, shown in the painting as having ogival pyramid roofs with central decorative finials. Originally single storey, gables were added in the C19 to raise the height and create an upper floor. New windows were inserted above, doors punched through on the first floor from the terrace above, and the mullion and transom windows in the outer garden walls, identified in the painting, blocked up. The decorative balls and finials which are on the apex of the front gables today match many in the painting and, if not reduced from the original roof (they are less ornate), are possibly from elsewhere in the garden.

Steps up to the middle terrace (Susi Batty)

There is, however, a more crucial change to the Fountain Court: it is no longer a tightly enclosed space, accessed only from the house. The breaching of the wall by the drive where there was originally only a small pedestrian gate, and the imposition of a flight of steps between the gazebos leading to further terraces, flights of steps and a final flourish of obelisk piers, shifted the emphasis. In the painting the dividing wall is clearly unbroken and runs in front of the gazebos; and a tall dovecote, complete with fluttering white doves, abuts the extended arm of the eastern wall outside the formal garden. On the 1790 estate map the dividing wall is still un-breached; by the time of the 1795 survey map, the dovecote has vanished and two long thin outbuildings project south towards the Upper Barn. The 1840 tithe map shows no steps but does indicate four square shapes: the two gazebos, the dovecote and one other. The 1886 Ordnance Survey map shows all of the flights of steps but only the two gazebos. Looking carefully at the brickwork of the retaining walls to the steps leading from the Fountain Court to the higher terrace, it is apparent that they have been cut through the original revetment and therefore post-date the dividing wall. This tallies with the map evidence but it is difficult to attribute an exact date. Arguably they are late C18 but may possibly be nineteenth.

Patient woodland clearance of what was the garden between the Upper Terrace and the southern boundary is gradually revealing original features. Close to the site of the dovecote is a small decayed brick building, clearly early since it is shown in the painting. This has been interpreted both as a potting shed and, more exotically, as an aviary for ornamental fowl. The opening in the south façade appears too large for a doorway, and, if the building was an aviary, may have been closed with a grill. The north façade contains two filled-in oculus windows encouraging the latter interpretation as the windows are ornate for a purely functional building. The vestiges of a Victorian fern walk near to the southern boundary below the Upper Barn have also been uncovered.

Below the house the garden becomes more open in feel. The estate map identifies areas such the 'Fir Garden' (possibly a tree nursery), the 'Deer Park Meadow', 'Park Close', 'Little Park' and 'The Warren'. There are references in the poem to "tall Beeches", "Pines", "Holmes [holm oaks] and silver Firs", but no eighteenth-century trees remain standing. The rectangular pool marked on the map, probably a holding basin for fish from the larger fishponds to the north-east, was filled for use as a tennis court in the C20. Within the wood a loop in the carriage drive provides the opportunity for a more leisurely approach and a rudimentary system of pathways and clearings in the Grove, indicated on the estate map, but less apparent in the painting, suggest a simple, but planned pedestrian perambulation. Such walks or leisurely drives through closely-planted woods would have been part of the 'entertainment' provided for visitors to Langdon.

Squeezed into the bottom right-hand corner of the painting is a third walled garden: the kitchen garden, all now in private hands and built on [12]. Only part of the geometric planting beds, a single garden building and one end of one of the fishponds are visible in the painting, but both the estate and survey maps show two basins and a series of parterres and terraces within a sizable formal garden, poised above two fishponds in the valley below (one quite small, the other an unusually long, slim canal running down the valley at an oblique angle south-west/north-east from the Park Meadow through the Park Wood). The anonymous poet was clearly much taken with the kitchen garden:

The Gardens next our strict Observance claim,
Ev'n they alone had been a copious Theam;
To what vast lengths the Terraces extends'
Bounded by tall Pinasters at each End;
A Thousand various Objects feast our Eyes,
The kind effects of th'english Paradise.

He describes a riot of laurel, box, cedar, yew, orange trees and myrtle, as well as topiary ('On Trees unfeather'd Fowl and leafy Cattel grow'), 'a vegetable Castle', and a wildly productive greenhouse, all blessed by 'th'indulgent Sun' and 'gentle Auster'.[13] In the gardener's lease Roger Williams is instructed to maintain the 'Greenhouse at his own Expence...to take and use all the Mellon and Cucumber Frames', clean the fishponds, and care for the gardens 'in a workmanlike manner and according to the best Rules of Gardening'. Two amendments to the lease list some of the fruit trees planted in the kitchen garden, which included 'Peach Nectarins plumbs Apricotts & Cherrys; ....Best Appels For table'.

Dominating the painting and dwarfing the house and garden is the Warren, a brick-walled grassy mound topped by a curious belvedere. Literally the artist has made a mountain out of a molehill, emphasising the views from the summit across the wider landscape to the distant sea and the little church at Wembury. On the 1780 estate map the warren tunnels are outlined but the belvedere does not appear; by 1795 the land is turned over to arable use and today nothing remains of the leporidaean paradise. Interestingly, the poet also exaggerates the significance of the Warren with a lengthy descriptive passage and fanciful imagery:

The spacious Warren next my Muse surveys;
But stops what means this long stupendous Pile,
Let's in a Transport view the same a while;
Seth for Brick-building heretofore was Fam'd.
But let not now his Work again be nam'd;
No more a wonder we'll his Pillar call,
Tis far outdone by Langdon's Warren Wall [14]
See the mute Actors on the rural Stage,
Shifting their various Postures like the age;
Each Sentinal gives tacitly th'alarm;

And with prophetick Feet, foretells th'approaching harm...
A Pleasure-house within the Warren stands,
And a full Prospect of all commands . . .

The final flurry of flattery from the poet revels in the glorious views from the summit and peoples the landscape with gods: rude Pan guards the densely populated rabbit warren and the surrounding woods, Neptune and Mars create havoc beyond the safety of the bounds of the estate and Apollo is invited to descend from Parnassus to Langdon Court.

John Harris has dismissed Langdon Court as 'a humble squire's house in a remote part of England'.[15] I would argue that it was more than that. A modest, dignified garden, created comfortably in the formal, geometric tradition of the later years of the previous century, it was hardly innovative for its time; but Devon was very distant from London and change came slowly to the south-west. In that conservative context, the gardens were a significant creation although little is known about their creator. Josias Calmady was clearly an educated man, familiar with classical literature and ideas, perhaps more of an intellectual than a plantsman. Langdon Court fascinates us today because of the existence of the rich archival material which enables us to flesh out the remnants of the garden and visualise the C18 landscape in its entirety. Rarely do such treasures combine so satisfyingly. A true illustration of Horace Walpole's later claim that "Poetry, Painting and Gardening, or the science of Landscape, will forever by men of Taste be deemed Three Sisters, or the *Three New Graces* who dress and adorn Nature". [16]

References

1. Oil on panel, 63.5cm by 141.5cm, now owned by the City Art Gallery, Plymouth.
2. West Devon Record Office, 1085/5.
3. Surveyed by Richard Davis for Charles Holmes Everett and his wife, Pollexfen (née Calmady). Devon Record Office, 6107M/E1-3
4. DRO 1292/Estate 7/7.
5. Charles Cotton's poem extolling the glories of the estate at Chatsworth, *The Wonders of the Peak* (1683) is an equally ponderous exercise. Poems such as René Rapin's *Of Gardens* (1669, translated by John Evelyn in 1673) and Andrew Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* (1681), however, are both informative and a delight to read. Later works of this genre include James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730), Sir John Penicuik's *The Country Seat* (1731) and, of course, Alexander Pope's satirical and elegant *An Epistle to Lord Burlington* (1731).
6. John Worlidge, *Systema Horticultura: or the Art of Gardening* in three books by J.W.Gent, London, 1683.
7. 1795 survey map
8. WDRO 372/15/3/9
9. Viv Lorrimer, a garden historian working at Langdon Court in the 1980s, has suggested that they may have been moved from the front of the Upper Barn. Examining the painting this certainly appears possible, although only two pairs are shown and there are now four pairs on the bottom terrace or drive.
10. Marble, stone and bronze statues would have been expensive for a provincial squire. The statues were, in all probability, made in lead, which would have been painted to make them more life-like. Paul Stamper quotes a figure of £19 10s for "two lead figures and two stone figures together with the cases and carriage" for the gardens at Blodwell Hall, Shropshire, in 1719 (*Historic Parks and Gardens of Shropshire*, Shrewsbury, 2002, p.32).
11. John Worlidge, *Systema Horti-Culturae: or the Art of Gardening*, 1677.
12. When the estate was broken up in the 1920s the kitchen garden was sold for housing development and now a rather ugly and incongruous house squats there complacently in a manicured early twentieth century garden.
13. The south wind, and therefore assumed to be beneficial in gardens, although Brewer (*Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, London,* 1930), gives the following definition: "a wind pernicious to flowers and health. In Italy one of the south winds was so called; its modern name is the Sirocco. From the Greek: austeros, hot, dry. In England it is a damp wind, generally bringing wet weather". Brewer quotes James Thomson's *Castle of Indolence* (1748): 'Nought but putrid streams and noisome fogs,/For ever hung on drizzly Auster's beard'.
    Tempting though it is to assume that the anonymous poet might have misunderstood his references, I think we should assume that, in an English context, the south wind would be kind to gardens.
14. Brick is recorded used in 1540 by George Rolle, a London lawyer, at Stevenstone, his estate near Great Torrington, but it was almost unknown as a building material in Devon before the first half of the seventeenth century and not widely available until the 1690s, when ships delivering cloth to Holland returned with bricks as ballast. Here the extended description of the brick walls implies considerable prosperity.
15. John Harris, *The Artist and the Country House*, London, 1979, p.131.
16. In a MS annotation to William Mason's *Satirical Poems* (1722-81), edited by Paget Toynbee, Oxford, 1926, p.43. Quoted by Hunt and Willis in *The Genius of the Place*, London, 1975, p.11.