

The Lost Landscape of Tapeley Park

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It is all too easy to assume that what has been written and has been recorded about a well known garden or landscape is all that there is. If anything came out of the Garden History M.A. course at Bristol University that I undertook several years ago it is that everything must be queried, nothing must be accepted. The landscape and grounds surrounding Tapeley Park, Westleigh, north Devon are a very good example of the tendency to accept the twentieth century work and not to look much further. In fact there is a great deal of earlier landscaping, backed up by map evidence and early pictorial records, that has so far been ignored.

For a period of five years, I rented a former gardener's cottage situated at the entrance to the back drive to Tapeley, known as Blackgate Cross. My morning walk took me along the drive and through the woods, areas not open to the general public. The disposition of the belts of trees and the placing of small copses in prominent positions were obvious features of a designed landscape; and the network of old drives was also not a surprising find. Previous research had led me to the series of delightful prints by Ferdinand Berhaus, made around 1800, housed at Tapeley, and to a poor quality copy of a picture of the house, also around 1800, taken from a sale catalogue, which clearly showed the original drive crossing the fields. This connected with the viaduct which led to the drive currently in use.



Ferdinand Berhaus print, c.1800

The gardens that surround the Grade II* listed house, Tapeley Park, are largely an early twentieth century creation. Most writers, and visitors, concentrate on the so-called 'Italian'

gardens, which fall from the house in a series of terraces to a spacious lawn and lily pond at the lowest level. To one side of the house is a large level lawn, with borders replanted in the 1990s to designs by Mary Keen and Carol Klein, with a shrubbery rising behind. The more energetic visitor descends through the woodland garden to the large lake with its poignant statue to young Archibald Cleveland, killed in the Crimea.

Tapeley Park was built in a commanding position overlooking the estuary of the river Torridge as it nears its confluence with the river Taw, with views out across the Bideford Bay. It has been the home of the Clevlands and their descendants since 1702. The red brick house dates from their time, and it was to Tapeley that Commodore William Cleveland retired when his sea-faring days were over. He died in 1715. His son, John (d. 1763) was M.P. for Saltash and Secretary to the Admiralty, and was succeeded by his son, also John (d. 1817). As M.P. for Barnstaple for forty years, this second John felt the need for a larger house, and added the corner block, which included a large dining room to entertain his guests and prospective supporters. He may also have been responsible for the late eighteenth century landscape which is the subject of this paper.

The *Register of Parks and Gardens*,¹ lists an eighteenth-century landscape park and woodland, at most extensive c. 70ha, with a

walled kitchen garden, and an eighteenth century viaduct across a small, steep valley running up to the house from the south-west, now disused. The Park, it states, is not documented, but the outline of the park shown on the 1" O.S. map of 1890 corresponds to the present disposition of wood and parkland. Surviving eighteenth-century features include the ice-house and the grotto or shell house, both to the east of the house, and the walled kitchen garden. Cherry & Pevsner,² mention only the Italian terraced gardens adjoining earlier gardens, and list the kitchen garden, ice-house and shell grotto.

Map Evidence

The 1765 Benjamin Donn map shows the estate as an enclosed deer park, reached from Westleigh. The earliest O.S. map of 1809³ shows the configuration of roads at that time. The turnpike from Bideford to Barnstaple was not constructed until 1828, and it had a dramatic effect on the orientation of the house and drives. Prior to that time, the road passed over the high ground to the south east of Tapeley Park, and both the main and back drives connected with it. There was no continuous road along the riverbank, and the map shows areas of salt marsh with creeks and inlets. The grounds of Tapeley reached down to the river and included a long area of foreshore. The back drive from Blackgate Cross is shown, and the main drive passing through woodland to form a loop in front of the house and stables. Also shown is a drive running down to the river and following the line of the riverbank to reach Instow. All these drives are still in existence with the exception of the main drive from South Lodge.

The 1890 O.S. map⁴ depicts the layout of the parkland in great detail and many of the features shown survive today. These include the ice-house, walled garden, kennels and the brick-built orangery or dairy building.



Ordnance Survey map, 1809



Ordnance Survey map, 1890

Drives

The Old Lodge is now known as South Lodge and the original front drive began here, passing between gate piers, topped with stone orbs, one of which is still in situ. It wound round the edge of the field, ran along the edge of a plantation and dropped down to the causeway. It is interesting that from South Lodge only the roof of Tapeley is visible. Even this view was

lost as the drive dipped down to cross the stream, and it was only when the drive climbed up from the causeway that the house came into view, appearing as a prominent feature on higher ground. It is also noteworthy that the parish road from South Lodge to Westleigh appears to have been deliberately sunk as it crosses the high ground from where there should have been a good view of the house. The bank is now planted with pine trees, but these are not shown on the 1890 map.

Although the area to the west of the drive is now scrub, the two marked trees are now magnificent mature oaks, of enormous girth and stature. Legacies of the early planting at Tapeley, they would repay proper identification and measuring, as neither are common oaks, and one could qualify as a Champion.

The original drive became obsolete with the building of the new road in 1828, and a new lodge of neo-Grecian design with gate piers, sphinxes and Greek-key decoration⁵ was constructed. At that time the carriage drive shown on the 1809 map, descending from Tapeley and winding along the foreshore to Instow, was adopted as the main drive, and extended to the new road. Again, it is interesting to note that although the village of Westleigh, which is still largely owned by the estate, is close by, only the roof and tower of the church are visible from this drive. Of the original village, nothing can be seen. The embankment which carried the railway, built in 1855, effectively cut the parkland off from the foreshore and substantially reduced the tidal range.



Mature oak tree, Tapeley (Rosemary Lauder)

Following the old drive northwards from above the new lodge, it passes by an area marked

as the site of 'Old Limekiln'. This area also shows two small circles on a mound. This mound exists, but I could find no evidence of a lime kiln. There is evidence of a track that would have led to the foreshore before the embankment closed it off, and there is still an inlet in this area. The track proscribes a large semi-circle, passing behind the mound, from which there would have been a prominent view of the river Torridge, and Appledore on the opposite bank. A well with a stone surround is hidden in the bank, and all is very overgrown. The track continues, now high above the road, and, before the tree cover grew up, would have afforded wonderful views out over Instow and the estuary. At the point where it turns inland, a small path leaves the drive, leading to a circular platform, which would have had an almost panoramic view. There is no evidence of any building, and it is only small in size, so may have contained a seat. It is easily missed. The drive then continues, high above what is now a meadow but would once have been a tidal creek, with evidence of old lime kilns and a former small quay at South Yeo farm. Eventually it reaches the fish pond. According to the statue erected to the memory of Archibald Cleveland, killed in the Crimea, this ornamental lake was constructed in 1840 for young Archibald by his father. It is of considerable size, with two islands, and is fed by an upper pond which is badly silted up. There is intriguing evidence of other streams and ditches nearby; and, much higher up the valley, in the farmland beyond the East Plantation, there are the remains of another sizeable lake, formed by building a large dam across the stream. It is surrounded by trees and the remains of railings. East Plantation contains a series of paths

and drives, with remains of footbridges and possible waterfalls, all gone to seed.

The only known built structure in the parkland was the obelisk built in 1855 to the memory of Archibald. It stood in the field in front of the house where it would have been clearly visible from the estuary. Only the granite base remains as it was struck by lightning in 1932.

Few houses can have been built with such wonderful views in all directions. It is interesting to note that the stables are sited to the north of the house, and that the servants' quarters and kitchens are also on this side. Although there are views across Bideford Bay, this aspect would also take the worst of the Atlantic gales, hence the original orientation of the house was south and west. From the south front, the land falls sharply down to a small stream and then rises again, and it is here that evidence of early landscaping works are to be found.

Early Plantings and the Ha-Ha

Unfortunately, access to the estate office records, where verification of the planting and relevant dates might be found, was denied; but much can be deduced from maps, pictures and evidence on the ground.

Opposite the house are the remains of a small clump of trees, shown on the 1890 map; and some of the parkland trees shown in the fields and banks. The long field to the east of the back drive is edged by the long line of Oakbear Copse bordering the public road, and a narrow belt of ancient oaks connecting with East Plantation. From this area, the copse in front of Tapeley is the focal point, being planted on the highest ground before it falls to the river. There is evidence of an old track winding through the Oakbear Copse, which is a mixture of oak and beech, with many tree stumps and fallen pines. This could have linked up with the main drive, as the two cottages at Blackgate are twentieth century. The back drive, from Blackgate Cross, is now bordered by railings, but the field to the west rises in height, retained by a cobbled bank, so that the drive would be hidden from the terrace in front of the house. Gate piers once marked the entrance to the grounds, and by turning left (west) at this point, evidence of a ha-ha is found. This takes the form of a ditch containing a small stream, bounded by a wall on its north. This is of rough stone until it reaches the area immediately in front of the house, where it is built of regular stone, with two small semi-circular piers.



Remains of ha-ha (Rosemary Lauder)

Detail of semi-circular pier in the ha-ha (Rosemary Lauder)



None of this would have been visible from the house, because the ground is ramped up to the height of the wall, some four to five feet. From the house, therefore, the view would have been down a grass slope and, without any interruption, out across the parkland to the copse and adjoining plantations (the estate once contained many copses, planted with pines, of which only a few trees have survived). The print of Tapeley by Ferdinand Berhaus, dating from around 1800, shows the house in just such a setting.



View towards the house today (Rosemary Lauder)

The stream runs on down into the area shown as The Rookery. Here there are many intriguing remains - underground pipes, evidence of water entering the marshy depression that corresponds with the Rookery Pond, odd remains in the stream bed that might have been rills or cascades. There is no evidence of the causeway ever having acted as a dam; the ground falls too steeply for this to have been effective.

With the death of Archibald Cleveland, the estate passed through his sister, Agnes, who married into the Christie family, with estates at Saunton in North Devon, and Glyndebourne in Sussex. The appearance of the house was drastically altered by Agnes and William who gave it an unattractive brick façade and altered the windows. It is not known whether they undertook any alterations to the grounds. Their son, Augustus Christie, married Lady Rosamund Fellowes in 1882. She left a notebook recording her work at Tapeley:

*When I first saw Tapeley in the winter of 1881...the terrace walk and garden did not exist, the drive approached between iron railings on each side, and on the library side there were a few flower beds and the lawn... the stone steps existed, but instead of the present stone walls and flower border there was a steep bank with a pleasure ground of conifers above it.*⁶

It was she who called in the architect John Belcher to revamp the house, and who also planned the gardens which are such a feature of Tapeley today; but underlying it all, there remains still the skeleton of the much earlier landscape. The natural style, so fashionable towards the end of the eighteenth century in less remote parts of the country, was by no means common in distant Devon. Surviving examples, in varying states of preservation, are to be found at Castle Hill, Youlstone Park, Tawstock Court and Clovelly Court.

References

1. English Heritage, 1987.
2. Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Devon*, 2nd edition, London, 1989, pp. 778-779.
3. 1" O.S., Old Series of England and Wales, Volume II, 1809.
4. 25" O.S. Map, Sheet 12:15 (NDRO)
5. Cherry and Pevsner, p. 779.
6. Rosamund Christie, *Notes on Tapeley*.