

The Coombe Royal Citrus Wall and the Outdoor Cultivation of Oranges in Devon

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Cultivating orange trees was once the preserve of princes and aristocrats; but during the first four decades of the eighteenth century nearly forty orangeries were built across the counties of England alone. Devon had a history of early fruit-growing, both indoors and out and the original orangery at Saltram (designed by Henry Stockman in the early 1770s) was part of the late flourishing of these fascinating buildings. Here large sash windows provided light for the orange trees from Genoa which were displayed outdoors in the orange grove from 29 May until the second Wednesday in October.¹ Orange trees were grown on several estates, often with other citrus plants: most usually lemons but also limes, shaddocks (similar in size to grapefruit and rather bitter in taste) and citrons. Among surviving historical accounts there are details of small orange trees for sale at Powderham Castle, the seat of the Earls of Devon.² Lately there has been renewed interest in the all year round outdoor cultivation of citrus plants.

Salcombe

Just over two hundred years ago Woodville (now known as Woodcot) in Salcombe grew oranges, lemons, limes and citrons against a 3.65m (12') high south-facing wall with only straw matting to protect the plants through winter.³ Such practices were not unusual in and around Salcombe. At Cliff House, then the home of the Customs Agent, Mr Barrable, there was a recessed wall for citrus plants. With a micro-climate where temperatures are similar to those of Florence, Salcombe was ideally-placed for such innovations with what were then regarded as exotic plants.

Coombe Royal, Kingsbridge

A few miles north at Coombe Royal, near Kingsbridge, there is a remarkable and imposing recessed and arched citrus wall. It stands in the grounds of what was originally the family home of the Luscombes and is now the property of Devon County Council Social Services. Citrus fruit were clearly highly esteemed: the wall dominates the view from the drive as it curves towards the house. There are also remnants of another wall, smaller in scale and straight-sided, in a raised garden adjoining the house to the right; although very little evidence of its function survives. In a watercolour painting still in the possession of the family the site of the raised garden is obscured in a smudge of trees;⁴ but the large conservatory to the left of the house which complemented it in the garden's Victorian and Edwardian heyday can clearly be seen.

The Luscombes, owners of Coombe Royal from 1722 until the 1880s, were locally and nationally renowned for their citrus plants. In 1827 John Luscombe (d.1831) was awarded the Royal Horticultural Society's Banksian Medal for his oranges, lemons and citrons. In 1904, over a century later, the same citron trees were praised in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* for their continuing ability to produce large fruits, varying from 43 to 48 cms (17" to 19") in circumference. The writer also noted that in 1850 a selection of Coombe Royal's citrus drew admiring comments from the recipient, Queen Victoria. The space occupied on the succeeding page by a large photograph of the arched 'Orange-wall garden' and the exclamation mark used to introduce 'The Orange Garden!' suggests that this was (and remains) the star feature at Coombe Royal.⁵



The Citrus Wall at Coombe Royal, illustrated in the *Gardener's Chronicle*, 2 January, 1904

The dimensions given for the bays or recesses were widths of roughly 4.5 m (15') and approximately the same height; the actual recess being about one third of a metre (1') deep. No mention was made of

the number of arches of this south-facing wall, nor the fact that they were not uniform in size. Fortunately an earlier article which appeared in the August 1871 issue of the *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* does. Giving the height of each recess as almost 3.3m (11'), it noted the different widths. The biggest recess, at 4.8m (16') was occupied by the citron; the lemon grew in the second largest, 4.5m (15'); the Seville orange, lime, mandarin, shaddock, and mandarin orange were allocated amongst the other six, each 3.6m (12') wide. The writer recommended anyone wishing to emulate the model to increase the width to 5.4m (18') to reduce the need to cut back the branches which might affect their 'fruitfulness'.⁶ One of the plants, a Seville orange, was said to be over two hundred and fifty years old and still regularly produced over two hundred

fruits of varying sizes. Such a favoured spot may also have been used to cultivate peaches, as a row of small trained trees stands in front of the wall in an undated photograph.⁷

By 1904 eighteen sentry-like pyramidal *Retinospora obtusa* 'Aurea' roughly half the height of the wall had been planted behind the gravel walk which ran the length of the wall. Large flower beds were set into the grassy slope from the path towards the drive,⁸ climbers had been planted against the pillars, and waist-high iron railings installed beyond the flower beds.⁹ The list of shrubs and trees planted to the rear of the walk and linking it to the pleasure ground underscores the significance of this area of the garden. The practice of protecting the citrus with wooden-framed mats continued into the middle of the twentieth century: vast panels three sections high provide the backdrop to a photograph of the gardener Mr Webb in 1939.¹⁰

Twenty-first century successors

Sadly, maintenance at Coombe Royal has been sporadic over the years and the extraordinary citrus wall, possibly unique in its scale and significance, is in a parlous state despite recent clearance of invading plant material by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.¹¹ Considerable archive material relating to the fruit wall exists but this requires consolidating. In the meantime the DGT is keeping a close eye on developments.

At Saltram, however, oranges flourish: ten trees in superb wooden tubs form a half circle in front of the vast Orangery; and the display continues both in the small Tudor courtyard and in the orange grove. Graceful white Chinoiserie tubs, redolent of the mid-eighteenth century, add to the enchantment.



The Orangery at Saltram (Carolyn Keep, 2008)



The Tudor courtyard at Saltram (Carolyn Keep, 2008)

Round-the-year outdoor cultivation of orange trees has recently been revived as part of a process stretching back to the earliest years of citrus cultivation, at Coleton Fishacre, near Kingswear on the south Devon coast. The microclimate at this National Trust property, once the home of the D'Oyly Carte family, makes it well-suited to growing tender plants from the Mediterranean and further afield. There, instead of a masonry wall, protection for the orange trees will be provided in the sheltered valley; and a mixture of traditional and contemporary techniques will be employed to discover which varieties prosper.

Increase in temperatures due to global warming may, of course, make the cultivation of citrus fruit even easier; and we may see a wider revival in other historic gardens in the county.

References

1. Patricia Oliver, *Success with Citrus* (Poole: Global Orange Groves, 1993), p. 31, cited in Helen Langley, 'Historic Orangeries in England and their conservation', unpublished graduate diploma dissertation (Architectural Association, London, 2006).
2. Audrey Le Lièvre in 'Oranges and Lemons' *Convivium*, vol. 2, No 2, Summer 1994, pp.51-62, refers to the sale of Powderham plants in the early eighteenth century. Priced variously at £2 and half a guinea (10s 6d) for smaller ones. No dates were given in the article but if it was around 1720 the sums translate in today's money to approximately £169 and £45 respectively. A copy of the *Convivium* article and other archival sources used in the present article were provided by Carolyn Keep and Clare Greener. I am indebted to them for sharing their researches into the cultivation of citrus in Devon. My interest dates from June 2008. While researching and authoring webpages featuring six of the National Trust's orangeries I came across a notice on the web about the Devon Gardens Trust's interest in the Coombe Royal citrus wall. Carolyn and David Keep very kindly hosted and facilitated a research visit in August 2008, making it possible to visit key sites connected with the cultivation of oranges. Carolyn Keep's comments on an earlier draft of this article were extremely helpful.
3. Sales Catalogue, 1896, DRO 1182M/ZI.
4. Owned by John Elliot, great grandson of Mrs Luscombe, 22 August 2008.
5. The *Gardener's Chronicle*, 888, 4 January, 1904, pp.1-2. Coombe Royal was owned by E. J. Bowring who lived elsewhere; for the last twenty years it had been occupied by Mrs Eady-Borlase and Miss Emily Turner.
6. *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* 31 August, 1871, p. 63. An engraving on the same page shows the wall against a background of trees and shrubs. To the front on seemingly near-level ground were three large circular flower beds.
7. Carolyn Keep in an email to the writer, 23 August, 2008 forwarding the image sent by John Elliot.
8. The *Gardener's Chronicle*, q.v.
9. Sales catalogue 1912, DRO 547B/982.
10. Audrey Le Lièvre, p. 57.
11. See article by John Clark and Malcolm West on Coombe Royal in this Journal.