Clarification and Revision of Escot's Seventeenth-century History

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The importance of Escot Park to the landscape history of East Devon begins in the seventeenth century. Previous writers record Robert Hooke (1635–1703) as architect for the mansion built at Escot for Sir Walter Yonge 3rd Baronet (1653–1731). Research presented here aims to offer explanation for Hooke's documented plans and to corroborate recent reports that William Taylor was the true designer. A newly discovered survey of Escot is analysed, and its relevance to the seventeenth-century garden is discussed. Yonge and close neighbours, Edward Clarke and Richard Duke, were good friends of philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) and their shared interest in gardening is explored.

Escot Park lies approximately 15 miles north-east of Exeter and 8 miles south-west of Honiton. Sir Walter Yonge purchased the Escot site from the Channons on the 10 March 1680, having previously been resident in Colyton, a Devon village between Honiton and Lyme Regis.[1] In 1677 Yonge married Gertrude Morice whose grandfather, William, had been Lord of the Treasury, but tragically, both wife and new-born daughter died on the 13 January 1679.[2] Later that year he was elected MP for his family borough of Honiton, a post he held almost uninterrupted for over 30 years. He was an influential Exclusionist, but his ambiguous sympathies led to later claims of 'Whig collaborator'.[3] In 1691, more than ten years after purchasing Escot, Yonge married co-heir, Gwen, daughter of Sir Robert Williams, with whom he had one son, William, and four daughters. William had little interest in Escot and the garden created by his father is likely to have remained until his own son, George, inherited the estate in 1755.

After the publication of Marjorie Batten's *The Architecture of Dr. Robert Hooke* in 1936 and subsequently Bridget Cherry's 'Devon Country House' in 1988, the seventeenth-century house at Escot became firmly attributed to Robert Hooke; both authors referred to *The Diary of Robert Hooke* as support for their claim.[4] However a more recent article by Bridget Clarke in *The Georgian Group Journal* suggested Escot had instead been designed by William Taylor.[5] Having revisited *The Diary* transcription, it is clear that Hooke did produce a draft plan for Yonge for which he received a part payment of five guineas on 14 February 1677. It would seem he did not visit Devon himself, but after several visits to the county by his carpenter and joiner during the autumn, Hooke continued his correspondence with Yonge for several more weeks. During 1678 they held a series of meetings in London, and a further two meetings in 1679, but no further payments or plans are mentioned. Hooke's original diary extended to 1683, and although Robinson and Adams excluded later entries from their *Diary* transcription these were subsequently published by the Royal Society.[6] Inspection reveals no further mention of 'Young', hence it is assumed their meetings ended in December 1679, which is the year before Yonge purchased the Escot site. Yonge's marriage in April 1677 may have prompted Hooke's commission and may also explain the gap in their correspondence between March and July that same year. Reverend Richard Polwhele, who visited Escot in 1794, recalls his conversation with Yonge's grandson, Sir George, who revealed how his grandfather had initially begun to build, not at Escot, but Mohuns Ottery, Luppitt, 4 miles north-east of Honiton:

> With regard to the building of Escot house, it was begun by my grandfather, Sir Walter Yonge, I think about the year 1680, and was not quite finished till after the revolution. … the conveyance of it to Sir Walter Yonge, March 10th 1680; whose father just dead, had actually begun to build a seat at the ancient mansion of Mohuns Ottery, in the parish of Luppit [sic], near Honiton: but Sir Walter taking a liking to the situation at Escot, purchased it and immediately began to build the present seat.[7]

Deeds held in the Somerset Heritage Centre (SHC), dated 7 February 1668 support this testimony and confirm the sale of a manor to Sir Walter Yonge by 'Mr Robert Stephens of the Barton of Mohuns Ottery'.[8] The date of the Lease and Release document suggests Yonge's father to be the purchaser (also called Sir Walter), who subsequently bequeathed the estate to his teenage son. Walter inherited the site two years later, along with the title of 3rd Baronet, but it was to be another eight years before he purchased more of the Mohuns Ottery estate from the Southcote and Carew families, coinciding with the period he corresponded with Hooke.[9] However there is no indication that Yonge or his father lived at Mohuns Ottery or rebuilt extensively on the site and when the Bargain and Sale of Escot was finally completed in 1680, Yonge was described as being resident in Colyton, the family seat near Seaton. It would seem reasonable to assume Hooke's

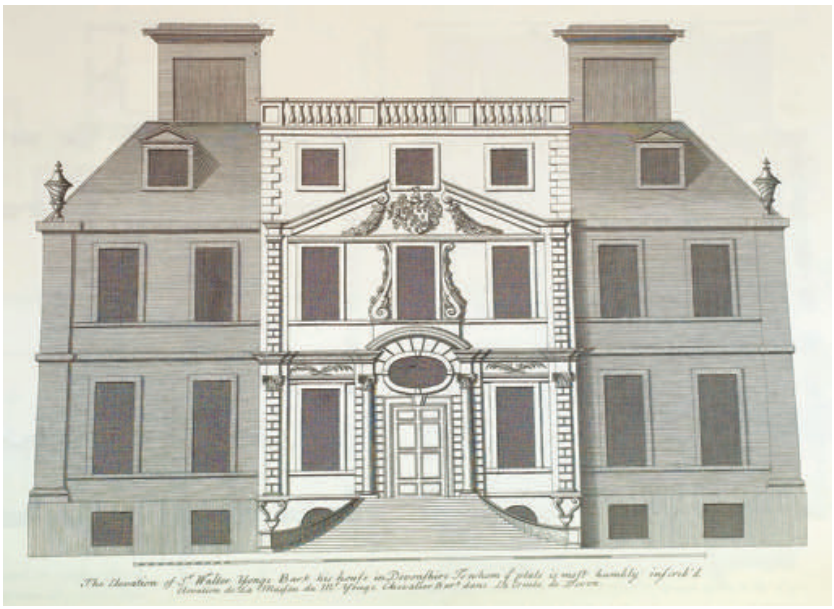

Figure 1. Front elevation of the Devonshire House of Sir Walter Yonge taken from Vitruvius Britannicus

commission was therefore for Mohuns Ottery not Escot and, despite the purchase of more land in 1678, the untimely death of his wife and daughter a few months later caused the project to be abandoned. Understandably, much emphasis has been given to engravings illustrated in *Vitruvius Britannicus,* which show the elevation and floor plans of 'Sir Walter Yonge Bart his house in Devonshire', presumed to be that of seventeenth-century Escot (Figure 1).[10] However the name of 'Escot' is not mentioned in the title or the original drawings so it is likely these engravings show what Hooke proposed for Mohuns Ottery.[11]

Figure 3 Estcot [sic] December 1794. DHC 564M/F/7 Rev John Swete, The Picturesque Sketches of Devon

The seventeenth-century house at Escot was destroyed by fire in December 1808 but fortunately Polwhele recorded a full description during his visit in 1794, and although the internal layout corresponded well with the *Vitruvius Britannicus* plan of the unnamed house, the exterior of Escot had one significant difference.[12] Recounting the top floor Polwhele mentions, 'the atticks are divided into 16 different rooms of different sizes, with a cupola in the centre and a gallery around it communicating to the rooms'. Curiously, the Bonner illustration Polwhele chose to include with his work omits the cupola (Figure 2), although it is clearly shown in a watercolour painted by the Reverend John Swete a few months later (Figure 3).[13] Perhaps Bonner was working from

Figure 2. Escote. [sic]The Seat of Sir George Yonge Bart. T. Bonner. Rev Richard Polwhele, The History of Devonshire, 1793–1806 Vol II pp. 271-2

memory whereas Swete painted on site? The question now posed is, if not Hooke, then who designed the seventeenth-century Escot house that Swete and Polwhele visited in 1794?

In the 1990s Bridget Clarke's research into the life of her collateral ancestor Edward Clarke revealed significant links between Yonge, Clarke, and their mutual friends, Richard Duke (married to Yonge's sister Isabella) and John Locke.[14] She discovered a document headed 'Articles of Agreement' which confirmed Clarke's new house at Chipley, built in 1680, was designed by William Taylor (Figure 4) and was able

Figure 4 Chipley Park 1797 by John Buckler SHC. SHC Pigott Collection County Library Negative 1503

to link Taylor to other properties in the South West including Nynehead Court located two miles from Chipley, rebuilt for John Sanford in 1675.[15]

A second discovery by Bridget Clarke, written in Edward Clarke's precise legal hand, was 'Copy Articles of Agreement concerning the building of a house at Escott, Devon, 1st Aug sixteen eighty four', which confirmed beyond doubt that Taylor was responsible for the design of Yonge's new house.[16] Similar in format and content, Bridget concluded Escot was a later version of the Chipley home built three years earlier. Taylor was instructed to:

> … contrive designe and draw out in paper, one Capitall Mansion House and such convenient barns, stables and brewhouses and all other offices and out-houses, gardens corts and yards whatsoever thereunto belonging as the sd Sr Walter Yonge shall desire or appoynt at Escott. [Also to] diligently survey, overlook and attend for building up and finishing of the said mansion house and every part thereof together with all offices and outhouses, [including overseeing the] bricklayers, and free mason carpenter and joyner.[17]

The detail was meticulous, even specifying 'the mouldings, both sorts to be like thats in Mr Clarkes house at Chipley.' The carpenters were to be paid ten shillings on completion

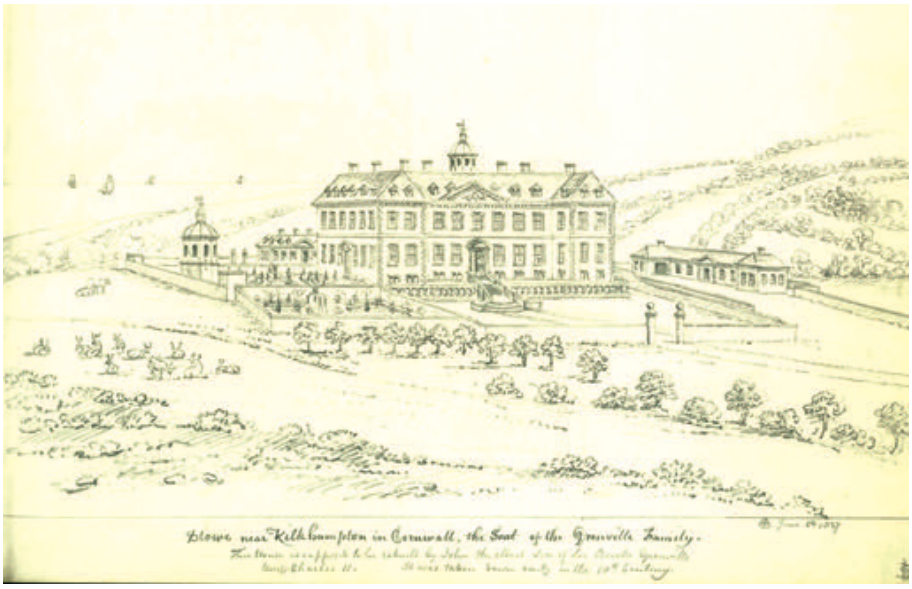

Figure 5. Stowe House, Kilkhampton, Cornwall. British Library Online Gallery

of each of the four 'storeys', yet the cupola was again not mentioned, suggesting it may have been built on a later recommendation by Taylor. The garden survey was to include structural elements with bricklayer, Robert Nutting, requested to,

> … carry up all the walls of the gardens … to be reduced to a brick and halfe in the foundations, and well as handsomely coped the same in such manner as the said Mr Wm Taylor … shall direct … at the rate of twenty shillings per rodd. … with the drayneys in the same bricks.[18]

Taylor, Nutting, and carpenter James Butterfield were all London residents; Taylor's address was recorded as 'of St. Thomas Apostles' close to Knightrider Street. Others had a more local connection; freemason James Lees lived in Langford Budville, less than a mile from Chipley, while joiners John Barber and James Taylor came from Cockington, near Torquay.[19]

Five months later the project was underway, confirmed by a previously unknown document entitled, *The Measures of Sr Walter Yonges New House at Estcott 1685*, possibly in Taylor's hand, with additions by Clarke.[20] The comprehensive document includes work for the carpenter and joiner, confirming Escot was to have doors onto its balcony roof, a long gallery and 'astrical mouldings' over the sash windows. Sash windows emerged around 1670, the expertise stemming from rebuilding London after the Great Fire, so it is likely Taylor and Butterfield brought these skills with them to Devon. Interestingly for garden historians, the brick account included a late Stuart 'Banqueting House', not mentioned in the original agreement but perhaps again the result of a suggestion by Taylor. It was to be 59ft by 10ft and possibly integrated into the surrounding garden walls.[21] In keeping with the house it was to have 'cornish' and 'hand moulding round the doors', '148 lights of glas windows with fittings of weights and pulleys and casings of windows, a pair of double doors, a pair of doors, and a single door in the room'. The cost of the joinery work was substantial at £21 11s 08d, with its '43 foot straith Arch' adding £1 15s 10d at 10d a foot. Importantly the document confirms how the 1680s garden was to have a 'tarrace' and to be enclosed by substantial walling of 43 rods 57 feet, at a cost of over £43. Taylor had been instructed to build gardens and 'corts', so it is possible several distinct walled areas were created, perhaps like those at Stowe House, Kilkhampton, a property built at a similar time for John Grenville 1st Earl of Bath, a relative of Yonge's first wife (Figure 5).

Figure 6. Het Loo in the late 1680s. https://www.codart.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/HoogheRomeijnViewOfPaleisHetLooRMA-620x635.jpg accessed 16.6.17

In 1686, Yonge travelled to the Dutch and Belgian Netherlands accompanied by his sister Isabella, her husband, Duke, and his widowed sister-in-law Elizabeth Yonge.[22] Locke, in exile there until 1689, wrote regularly to his friends, and their letters provide a useful account of their journey and day-to-day concerns.[23] Garden visiting featured in their travels, as mentioned in a letter from Isabella to Locke, written while she was in Maestricht, praising the garden of the Capuchin friars. They may have visited the baroque masterpiece at Het Loo (Figure 6), which was being constructed by their future king and queen only 40 miles from Utrecht, or closer still, Zeist, one of the largest gardens in the Netherlands, with its striking main axis and extensive canals.

By the autumn the friends had returned to England and as Yonge stayed in London it fell to Isabella to convey the progress at Escot to Locke. 'I have seen Escott, which loks very well without, but there is little done within, not one chamber finished or fit to receive my brother, I am afraid twill give him much pain before he finds any pleasure there yet'.[24] Four months later Yonge relates his continuing frustration:

> … to my building, in which durty work (however ill you think of it) I am too farr engaged not to go on a little farther, especially as Mr Taylor is leaving our country after this summer, and I would willingly, get beyond the need of an Architect before he gets out of my reach.[25]

By January 1687 the garden at Escot was taking shape with Yonge eager to keep Locke up to date with progress. 'I beg your pardon for not acquainting you sooner but the Lime trees came safe, and are all planted, and we hope will do well'.[26] Peter Laslett suggested that lime tree avenues were used to show a Whig allegiance but their use may have stemmed from published advice. In *Sylva*, John Evelyn particularly praised lime trees from Flanders and Holland for their speed of growth and spreading habit. He suggested using suckers as a successful method of propagation, resulting in specimens 'beautiful for walks, producing an upright body, smooth and even bark, ample leaf and sweet blossom, the delight of bees and a goodly shade'.[27] Locke also extolled their virtue, recommending the female species in particular for their red bark and flowers, although the creation of uniform trees grown easily and cheaply was doubtless another factor influencing their popularity.[28]

Locke often offered his horticultural expertise, and in 1683 had sent lime seeds to Clarke with advice for planting at Chipley:

> I desire you to make your walks broad enough, that is, let the bodies of the trees stand in two lines twenty foot in each side wider than the outside walls of your house, and then another row on the outside those twenty further. On the front I think lime trees would do best, on the east side elms, and the north witch elms, which is a better sort of trees than we commonly imagine.[29]

Of the three axial avenues Locke suggested it is still possible to see the lime tree approach. A year later he sent offsets to Clarke, who gratefully replied:

> … the lime trees you sent me, which are the finest I ever saw; and they being carefully planted by John Barber I question not but that they grow and prosper, but as yet I can have no certainty of that. … They are planted in a piece of ground that lies on the south-east side of my house.[30]

Barber was the head gardener at Chipley but split his time with Escot and Otterton, the home of Richard Duke, Yonge's brother-in-law, making it likely each garden had similar designs and character. He certainly worked on them concurrently as confirmed in Duke's letter to Locke November 1686 written while at Escot:

> John Barber has gotten an ugly cough and saies he finds himself decayed as if he were three score years of age, so that if you do not cure him, the new Gardens in the row will be spoild, and that I suppose you would not have lay at your door.[31]

As well as limes, Locke sent various other plant specimens for his friends to share and try out, as confirmed in a letter by Clarke. 'The poplar cuttings that you sent me I have planted plentifully of both sorts of them, and have reason to believe the Populus Alba or abele cuttings will grow as well as the other sort'.[32] Locke also sourced building materials, but dealing with Dutch suppliers was not without its problems and by May 1687 it would seem trading had become too expensive even for a gentleman of Yonge's substantial means:

> … am I in anyway obliged to take the paving bricks I bespoke long since; if they be bought I would desire him to put them off (though at some loss) rather than be necessitated to pave my stables at so great a charge, since our ordinary pebbles will doe well enough … there is no end of charge in building. Yet I love the building so well that I should be glad to find a meet help to finish it.[33]

There are no surviving seventeenth-century landscape plans for Escot, Chipley or the Manor at Otterton so we can only surmise how their gardens may have looked. Chipley had developed differentiated garden areas: a kitchen and herb garden, cherry garden, fruit orchard, and bowling green. These may have been walled or surrounded by filbert hedges, and in addition to Locke's suggested avenues, out in the landscape there was a rookery, deer park and carp pond.[34] However there is no mention of an elaborate formal garden in the many letters Bridget Clarke studied, and Clarke's correspondence with Locke centred on the typical mid-century activities of tree planting and productivity. An untitled image discovered by Bridget Clarke (Figure 7) may well show the approach to Chipley, and it is possible Escot had a similar design, with an avenue of limes creating a linear approach from the road. Yonge's personal preferences would doubtless have been influential, and the use of an axial line would have been in keeping with the developing

Figure 7. Untitled image thought to be Chipley in 1680 found in the Clarke papers. SHC DD\SF

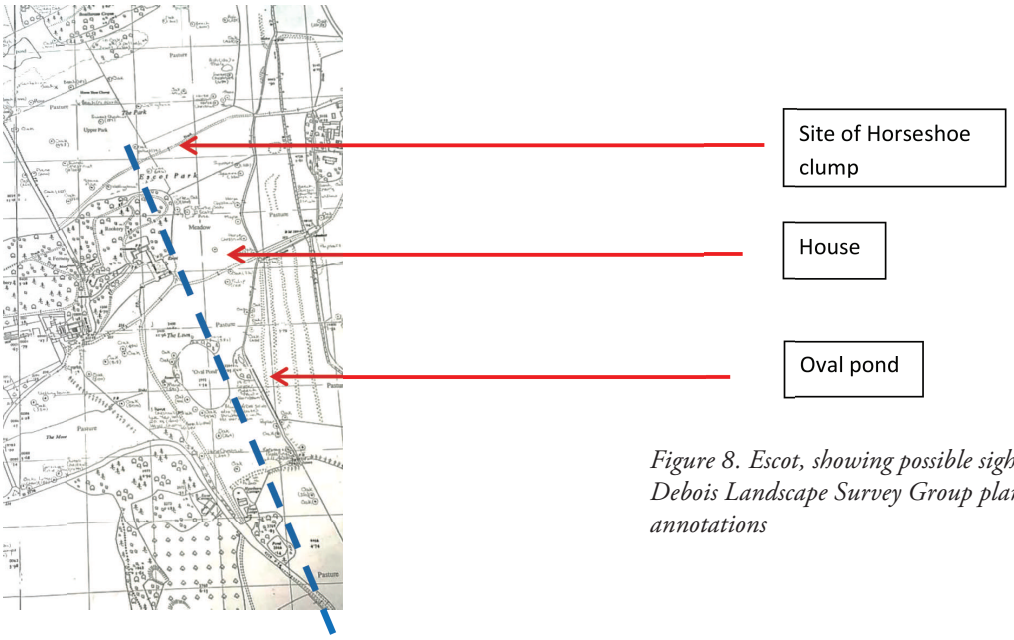

Figure 8. Escot, showing possible sight line using the Debois Landscape Survey Group plan, with author's annotations

seventeenth-century taste. From its raised platform, Escot would have commanded outstanding views across the gently sloping ground to the south and east, an aspect very much valued at the time, although the steep tree-lined hill at the rear would have made an axial line more challenging. A family tradition suggests Locke was responsible for planting the horseshoe clump that was located on the hill behind the house, and this could have been used to create a sight line through the house and on to the oval pond below (Figure 8).[35]

Yonge's son, William, spent the majority of his time in London, so it is possible a survey completed in 1763 by grandson George describes the garden created by his grandfather.[36] This document was re-used in 1794 when Richard Kennaway surveyed his newly acquired estate and confirms Escot, like Chipley, had various differentiated areas, such as kitchen gardens, stew ponds, melon grounds, a nursery and an ornamental pond. The survey's original purpose was one of land improvement, offering suggestions for increased productivity and value, such as clearance and drainage. It was proposed that 'Woodfield, the two kitchen gardens, a nursery and the Pond of Water to be Laid open for a lawn and properly dress'd and laid Levell as the Decent of the ground points out', suggesting it was at this time that Yonge's seventeenth-century enclosed walled gardens were removed. Additionally, Kennells Coppice 'might be drained and Planted to go to be a Wilderness and added to the Stew Pond Garden if that is to be a pleasure Garden provided the present Road was turned'. Reference to the two acre 'Stew Pond and Higher Mellon Ground Gardens proper to be made wholy in a kitchen garden' conveniently confirms their original position had been to the west of the house.[37]

Hooke's plan for Yonge was a fitting commission, reflecting the MP's status and connections. However it was not built at Escot and records, including those at the Royal Institute of British Architects, should now be corrected. Yonge instead chose Taylor to design the 'Capitall Mansion House' for his newly acquired Devon site at Escot, doubtless influenced by his friend Clarke and his experience of Chipley. The discovery of *The Measures of Sr Walter Yonges New House* confirms Yonge's intentions for his garden, walled with one or more enclosures, and with a banqueting house styled to match the house. Further archaeological work will be needed to confirm more detail and whether the design was carried out as planned. By the time Polwhele and Swete visited over a century later, the formal garden had been swept away, replaced by an open landscape in the new style of the time. This aspect will form the basis of a future reassessment of Escot's later history.

This article is an abridged version of a more comprehensive document that includes a study of relevant Dutch influences on Hooke's design, and describes more fully Yonge's political life and his correspondence with Locke. Please contact the author via the DGT should you require a full copy.

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16. SHC, DD\SF/10/4/32 Copy Articles of Agreement concerning the building of a house at Escott, Devon.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. The head gardener at Chipley, who also worked at Escot, was called John Barber, and it may be that the original tradesman stayed on in a new position.
20. SHC DD\SF/5/6/ Measurements of Walter Yonge's New House. The additions are written on the back in a different hand to the survey itself which is titled *The Account of Bricks and Works measured at Escott*.
21. The surveyor of bricks refers to a Banquetting House, but the Joiner refers to a Garden House.
22. The Debois Survey incorrectly records John Locke (who did not marry) to be Elizabeth's father.
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31. Ibid, p. 125, Escot 10 November 1686.
32. Ibid, p. 130, Chipley 26 March 1687 Clarke to Locke.
33. De Beer, *Correspondence of John Locke* (1976), letter 933.
34. Nynehead History Society, *The Book of Nynehead*, (Tiverton, Halsgrove, 2003), p. 66.
35. The connection to Locke is often repeated, but as recorded in a previous report for the DGT, the only written evidence is a diary entry by Felicity Ponsonby who stayed at Escot in 1910.
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