

FREMINGTON WALLED GARDEN

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For the last 250 years there has been a walled garden in the village of Fremington, North Devon. This garden served the family of the owners of Fremington House/Manor. From 1967 it was used as a market garden producing fruit, vegetables and flowers for sale at Barnstaple market and is still owned by a member of this family. For the last seven years, it has been left unused. The Manor house is now used as a residential home for the elderly and the former pleasure garden is the private garden of the property known as the Old Barn. The walled kitchen garden covers an approximate area of 1.5 acres or 6,000 sq. metres.

walled gardens. The family had close links with Killerton, in Broadclyst near Exeter. Elizabeth, the younger sister of the second Richard Ackland, married John Ackland (son of Sir Hugh Ackland of Killerton) in 1695. There appear to be no similarities in design or layout of the gardens or landscape.

In 1729, Ackland died and the estate passed to his wife and then in 1747 to his youngest daughter Susannah. In 1748 she married William Barbor, son of an eminent Barnstaple physician. William Barbor and Susannah had four sons. Their son William inherited the estate when his father died in 1773. Importantly he received a Gold Medal from the Royal Society of Arts for tilling and growing the greatest number of potatoes in twenty acres of land close to the walled garden (Barn-park and North East Chill-park) to feed 56 bullocks. It is noted that he carried out trials for growing potatoes, including one acre of potatoes planted using different manures. Dung produced 255 ten-peck bags,



Figure 1. Early detailed map of Fremington House 1776. The lands of William Barbor courtesy of North Devon Athenaeum

There has been a manor house on this site since Saxon times and it is mentioned in the Domesday book in 1086.¹ The estate has been referred to as Church Style, Church Stile and Fremington House in archive sources. In 1672 Richard Ackland a wealthy Barnstaple merchant, purchased the house.² In 1700 his son, another Richard, married Susanna Lovering, an extremely wealthy heiress, and when Ackland inherited the estate on the death of his father in 1703, he and Susanna began to build a stately Georgian house and

cob or mud walls produced 128 ten-peck bags, and rotten straw produced 102 ten-peck bags. He grew three different varieties and found that from the selection of white Irish, red Irish and white yams, the white yams produced fifty to sixty bags more per acre.³

The first map of the estate to include the house, walled garden and pleasure garden is within the hand drawn estate maps of William Barbor from about 1776 (figure 1).⁴ It shows the landscape and setting of the manor house including the walled gardens, which are relatively close to the main house. This suggests that the walled gardens were built in the early to mid-eighteenth century, as by the end of that century garden and landscape fashion was moving towards a more natural style with



Figure 2. Illustration showing a hunting scene at the gates of Fremington House 1794. The lands of William Barbor courtesy of North Devon Athenaeum

kitchen gardens being further away from the main house.⁵ The straight avenues and walks are also typical of earlier French influenced garden styles.

The front page of the map collection has a name panel by J Jewell, ‘teacher of mathematics, land surveyor, draughtsman etc.’ (figure 2).⁶ The front of the house, outbuildings and gardens are illustrated along with a representation of a hunting scene showing Barbor on the left side of the drawing. He died in 1800 from a fall, when his horse reared up at the entrance to the house when returning from a hunt in Barnstaple.

The Tithe map of 1842 (figure 3) and apportionment clearly show and describe the layout of the walled kitchen garden (526 and 527), pleasure garden (528), melon garden (579) and the productive slips (524). The walks around the pleasure garden and its glasshouse are well defined. The two glasshouses and backrooms are shown in the kitchen garden as well as the dividing wall.

The walled garden’s horticultural significance is stated within White’s *Directory of Devon* (1850). ‘Fremington House, a large handsome mansion with extensive gardens, green-houses, hot-houses with a valuable collection of exotics’.

By 1855 the railway line to Barnstaple that ran alongside the estate at Fremington quay was operational and this signified the beginning of the decline in the reliance on locally grown food for Fremington House and the community. Before this time all fruit and vegetables needed to be grown locally or purchased from the pannier markets on Barnstaple High Street.

A more specific reference to the walled garden and the plants that it nurtured comes from a local newspaper report in 1863:

In respect of the Cottage Garden Show, last week, we omitted to mention that, in addition to the magnificent show of flowers, ferns and mosses from Fremington House conservatories, which formed so conspicuous an attraction in the Exhibition, Mr. Bartlett, the gardener, showed some choice



Figure 3. Tithe Map of Fremington House (1842) showing the layout of the walled garden. Courtesy of North Devon Record Office

specimens of fruit, including grapes, pineapples, melons, apricots &c. We have since been favored with an inspection of the beautiful gardens and conservatories of Fremington House, which now appear in all their summer glory. The grounds naturally beautiful have been transformed by the head gardener’s art into a most exciting spot. Majestic trees that have braved the storms of centuries formed a beautiful shady vista, which opens out into lovely oases of verdure, variegated by bright coloured beds of geranium, fuschias, verbenas, calceolaris &c., forming, as it were, lovely patterns in nature’s velvet carpet. Beautiful rockeries and ferneries, fountains, ponds of gold fish, &c, here and there meet the eye; there is indeed, nothing wanting to give charm to the lovely grounds. Perhaps still more beautiful are the conservatories, the trees in which literally “bend with the fruitage”. Bunches of grapes hang in the hundreds; and every other kind of fruit grows in the same luxuriance and perfection.⁷

This is the most detailed description of the garden that has been found.

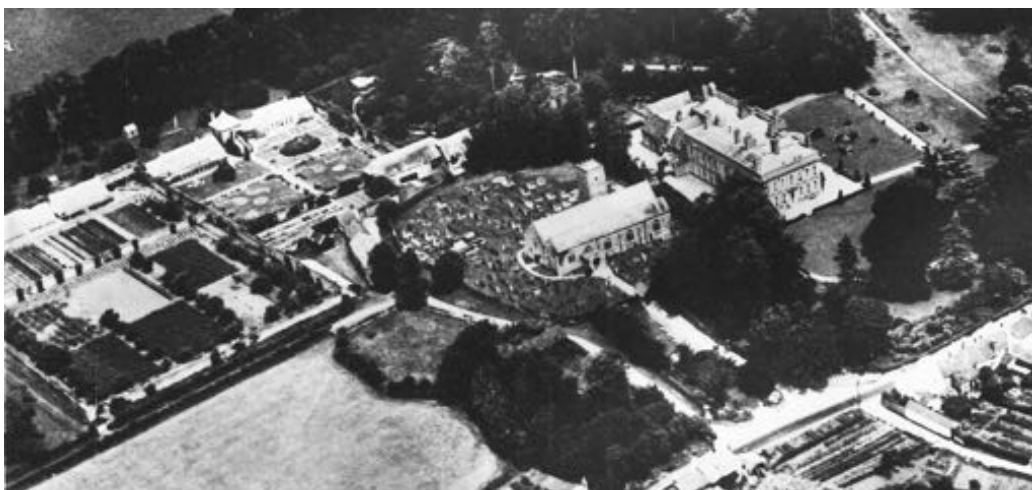


Figure 4. Aerial photograph of walled garden 1930, copyright: Historic Environment Scotland

An aerial photograph dated 1930, shows the walled garden in cultivation (figure 4).⁸ It can also be seen that the army camp has not been built so this means it must be before 1943.

The image reveals a number of important features. The pleasure garden retains its original formal layout with the four quarters and cross path. The four quarters have been developed and where the two original Georgian rectangular pools were, there is now an ornamental mound, which is still present today. The other side, in front of the orchid house, is a lawn with an ornamental tree that again is present now and has developed into a large elegantly spreading Mulberry tree. Very few of the current trees and shrubs in the garden are shown. The paths from Fremington House to the main entrance gate of the gardens on the east wall can be seen through the trees. The impressive Georgian gazebo can be seen, with the central path leading to the steps. The windows of the gazebo look out on all four sides; to the north views of the estuary, to the east a view of Fremington House, to the south views of the church and pleasure garden and to the west views across to the kitchen garden. The melon garden or frame yard can be seen with at least one row of built frames running from east to west.

The kitchen garden

The dividing wall is visible, with the east side doorway shown (this has now been widened). There are eight wall trained fruit trees on the south side of this wall and the productive bed in front is lined out with crops. The paths before the dividing wall that are shown on the first estate map (figure 1) do not appear. The layout had developed over time to suit productive crops within the walls. The first area is divided into six equal beds for large quantities of crops. It could be that this layout suited the market garden approach of the time, instead of the earlier ornamental and productive spaces being divided into the traditional 'four quarters'.⁹ The front side of the south wall appears under-utilized, as this could have been used for training fruit trees. It was suggested by the current owners that the area in front of the south wall (the slips) was used for potato growing as late as the 1960s.



Figure 5. Aerial photograph of the walled garden 1946, RAF aerial photograph courtesy of Devon County Council Historic Environment Record Office

The kitchen garden has an extra wall that runs from east to west. It is not integral to the external walls and it is not shown on the detailed map of the garden in 1776 but is shown on the 1842 tithe map. This suggests that the dividing wall was added to allow for additional productive walled fruit. Susan Campbell suggests that it was the French horticulturalist de la Quintinye in 1690 who recommended 'smaller walls within the outer ones' to increase the number of south facing walls for the training of fruit trees.¹⁰

The north wall has what appear to be tall buttresses on either side of the rear entrance door and two other buttresses either side of these. They are not buttresses but are chimneys for heated flued walls. There is one section of flued wall still intact, which is a good example of early kitchen garden design.¹¹ A 'hott' wall or fire wall was a preferred method of heating wall trained fruit in the eighteenth century, enabling fruit trees on south facing walls to blossom earlier. As this existing heated wall is only up to a height of six feet, it may have been used in the early eighteenth century for grape vines and heating this glasshouse. Few examples of heated walls exist in the South West.

The glasshouses

There are only three glasshouses shown on the Tithe map (figure 3), all built before 1842, but on the ordnance survey map of 1888 the conservatory has been added. The repeal of the glass tax in 1845 may have had some influence on the building of the later conservatory. All three glasshouses are of the lean-to type. The first glasshouse needs further investigation to establish its specific use that could have been for growing pineapples. The discovery of any pits or beds within the structure's foundations might reveal its historic use. The second glasshouse may have been used for growing the grapes mentioned in many of the horticultural show prize lists. During site visits a preliminary trench has been made to investigate how far the glasshouse extended from the wall. It was discovered that this was approximately twelve feet and the floor is constructed from lime ash. Further investigation is needed to establish the design of this building and if it does have the remains of the foundations with vine arches.

The current owner remembers that there were a number of vines on entering this glasshouse.

The third glasshouse within the pleasure garden may have been the orchid house or stove as it is set lower in the ground to be more energy efficient. It is mentioned in 1888, when James Taylor was paid £10 for attending to the orchid house.¹² The basic structure exists today although it has been converted into a potting shed/storage room.

The conservatory within the pleasure garden, built after 1842 and before 1888, is an ornamental building to the east of the stately gazebo. The parts of this building that do remain suggest a large unequal span roofed glasshouse with a central doorway opposite an ornamental grotto style alcove.

None of the maps or photographs indicate a water supply for the walled kitchen garden. The current owners stated that they collected water from the shed roofs for use in the garden. They also recall an underground tank located in front of the second glasshouse. This is an area for further investigation.

A 1946 aerial photograph from the Royal Air Force survey of Devon (figure 5), shows that the garden was no longer in production.¹³ This is unusual, as it would have been an ideal place for crop production during the Second World War. This may suggest that the garden was previously uncultivated and it was considered too much work to reinstate with the limited manpower of the time.

Gardeners

From historical records such as census, account books, newspapers and magazine articles, the four key documented head gardeners were John Cure, James Mitchell, John Bartlett and James Taylor. They cared for the gardens of Fremington House from 1776 to 1909 for a period of 133 years from the end of the Georgian era through to the end of the Victorian era. Their skill and dedication was noted by local and national journals.

In 1837, a report of the fifth annual meeting of the North Devon Horticultural Society states that:

Prior to the formation of the society, the dense population of Barnstaple and its attached parishes were inadequately supplied with fruit and vegetables; and since that period, the supply has been rendered abundant, as well in quantity as in quality and variety.¹⁴

The contribution made by James Mitchell working in the walled kitchen garden in Fremington and other horticulturalists in North Devon made a significant difference to local food and the supply of quality fresh fruit and vegetables. The production of fresh food was essential for Barnstaple and surrounding villages due to the isolation of North Devon. The main railway links did not open until 1854/55, so local produce would have been sold from baskets and panniers during informal markets, along the High Street and later in the Pannier Market, which coincidentally also opened in 1855. This covered market is still in use today. It was also stated in the report that 'Mr James Mitchell, gardener to G.A. Barbor Esq. was awarded the Banksian Medal for the greatest number of prizes for fruit exhibited in the year 1836'.¹⁵

James Taylor was first recorded as an apprentice gardener in 1851 (aged 20), living with the gardener John Bartlett. His place of birth was Shirwell, a small village north of Barnstaple. In the 1861 census he is listed as a 'gardener' aged 32, living with his wife Mary, and children Samuel, William and Mary. Having served his apprenticeship in Fremington, he was working as a gardener in Countisbury, East Lynmouth, North Devon.

When he returned to Fremington in 1880 as head gardener, it was noted in the *Western Times*.

The recent fine weather and the ability of Mr Taylor, the head gardener, have had their effect upon the noted gardens of Fremington, where everything, from the commonest vegetable to the most delicate fruit is in a promising condition – news most acceptable after the season of last year.¹⁶

On 19 January 1914, the *North Devon Journal* presented an editorial on 'Four Generations' including an image of 'James Taylor aged 85, a gardener, for 50 years in the employ of the Yeo family, at Fremington House' (figure 6).



Figure 6. Head Gardener of Fremington House, Mr James Taylor 1914, *North Devon Journal*

Three years later Taylor died aged 87; his obituary suggests he was 'one of the oldest inhabitants of Fremington. ... The deceased who was very highly respected, for fifty years attended to Fremington gardens'.¹⁷ He is buried in the churchyard at Fremington.

Looking through the accounts of 1886, it was clear that Taylor was the head gardener, with two other gardeners Mr Davey and Mr Edwards. In the spring the three gardeners purchased plants and seeds from local nurserymen. At the same time of year they also bought clay pots and nails. The pots purchased from Mr Fishley, Combrew, Fremington are historically interesting as Fishley slipware and ornamental pottery are still highly regarded and collectable.¹⁸ The potter at the time would have been Edwin Beer Fishley. No signs of pots or pottery fragments have been found on the site yet.

Future uses

The future of this walled garden is uncertain. The condition of the Grade II listed walls is critical and they need to be technically surveyed for conservation repairs to be carried out to ensure they do not deteriorate any further. The

priorities are the integrity of the wall copings, doorway lintels, and the validity of the south wall buttresses. The heated wall on the north side is of special historical importance and needs to be recorded and conserved. Kim Auston maintained in 2008 that of 35 walled gardens studied, only three were currently being used as intended.¹⁹ Every effort should be made to try to conserve and use this garden as originally intended.

Future options considered for a sustainable future include the creation of a community horticultural project within the area, centred at the walled garden. This appears to have potential and has been considered further to evaluate how this could be self-financing, after initial funding investment. As the walled kitchen garden is currently privately owned, the transfer of the ownership to the community in some way, such as a charitable trust, would enable a future partnership agreement with community groups or a charity organisation. This could help secure funding, with arrangements for public access and community control and management of the project.

The garden would be an ideal site for a community horticultural project. It would be most effective to use the dividing wall to illustrate separately the differing styles of a historic Georgian walled kitchen garden and the latest horticultural techniques such as aquaponics and urban agriculture.

Under this general description the project could develop into a social enterprise offering education, production, a visitor attraction and heritage restoration. Fremington has an active historical group and a small museum already exists at Fremington Quay at the site of the old railway station. The historical group could be involved in setting up the new visitor centre at the garden to make it a real community led project. The garden would then form part of a historical trail around the village.

Horticulture could be experienced through practical short courses for traditional and new techniques, which would include formal short educational courses; therapeutic horticulture/social prescription; comparison of traditional techniques and the science of soil-less crops; volunteering, harvesting and retail experience opportunities with plant sales and seed swaps.

There could be opportunities to grow high quality food for sale locally, certified organic, to include salad leaves and 'micro-veg', plus seasonal high value vegetables, fruit and cut-flowers. Production of food could be experienced through harvesting, preparing and cooking food from where it is grown to eating a healthy meal. This might involve formal short educational courses, the creation of volunteering opportunities, the establishment of a café offering food and drink within a beautiful walled kitchen garden. The scientific value of crop production could be experienced through formal short courses, educational visits and interpretation displays of the growing systems.

Conclusion

The garden as a whole has a high historic and illustrative value as it is probably the only surviving, brick built Georgian walled kitchen garden in North Devon. The garden and its glasshouses are directly associated with prize-winning

pineapple and grape growing. William Barbor's gold medal winning potato crop trials in 1793 suggest that Fremington is the place for potatoes. There is interesting social history associated with James Mitchell the scientific gardener and the struggles for political reform in 1838.

The community within Fremington is unaware that the garden exists, mainly due to its position by the former army camp and tucked behind the church. This project would have social value in the village, a place for the community to identify with. Involvement in the regeneration and conservation of the garden would give a sense of community ownership and provide the current residents of the village with a link to their past. At present the garden is a hidden gem, a secret garden that few know about. With investment, love and attention it could be brought back to life and be enjoyed by the community, both aesthetically and communally, through the production of locally grown fruit and vegetables.

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