

Bedfordshire Gardens Trust Symposium: 22 June 2019

The Designed Landscapes of Bedfordshire

BLHA's annual gathering of Bedfordshire's local history societies and enthusiasts took place in the Learning Zone at the Poplars Garden Centre, Toddington. This was the first time when a county-wide society (apart from the BLHA) had hosted the event, and possibly the first time when a single theme was adopted for a series of presentations.

The day began with the 26th Annual General Meeting of members of the BLHA. Mollie Foster ended her Chairwoman's report by asking that attendees encourage other society members to attend the annual conferences. She also requested that the societies which had not yet hosted a conference consider doing so in 2021. It was a great way to promote a local history society (and could be shared with a neighbouring society).



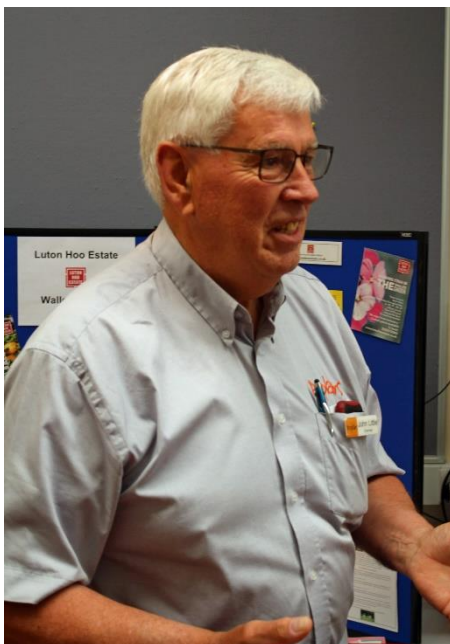
The symposium began with a keynote address on 'The Orchard as part of the Historical Landscape' by **Professor Tom Williamson**, a leading landscape historian and archaeologist with wide-ranging interests and a national reputation for outstanding work in his field. He immediately engaged the audience with his informative and entertaining presentation which gave a Bedfordshire perspective on the Orchards East Project. This is a detailed study of the presence and important role which orchards have played over time, given their ubiquity, as evidenced in the detailed nineteenth century Ordnance Survey maps, as well as earlier sources. Orchards produced a wide variety of fruit for human consumption, as well as providing, particularly when trees began to decay, a rich habitat for wildlife, enriching biodiversity.

Specific examples of specialised fruit-growing in Bedfordshire included damson prune production, a walnut plantation in Kempston, cherry tree orchards in the south of the county, Laxton's in Bedford, and Cox's Orange Pippin orchards at Cockayne Hatley, near Potton. There was further mention of the ornamental use of orchards by the Arts and Crafts movement at the beginning of the twentieth century and of the impact of commercialisation in increasing the varieties of fruit and of the growth of jam-producing businesses. If one had not thought of orchards as being of great significance in our history at the beginning of the talk, one certainly did by the end!



Caroline Bowdler, Conservation Officer for the Bedfordshire Gardens Trust and an active researcher, gave a fascinating overview of her research: 'From Medieval to Modern: the evolution of Designed Landscape in Bedfordshire'. Looking at the ornamental and recreational gardens in this county over time, she showed what a wide variety of sources can be used to piece together the development of designed landscapes locally: from monastic gardens with their productive warrens and fishponds providing food, psychic gardens to provide medicines, royal hunting parks for recreation and food, orchards (picking up on the earlier lecture) and on to mansion gardens of the rich, designed to impress visitors with their colour, shape and spectacle. She illustrated the move

from formal patterned gardens, influenced by French and other continental examples, through to the more 'natural' parkland of Brown and Repton and so on. Caroline ended with the influence of garden magazines and nursery catalogues in the development of middle class gardens, with examples of a range of gardens in Bedfordshire.



John Little, at whose garden centre the symposium was held, gave a very engaging talk on how, as a boy, his interest in the local landscape and history was spiked by an incredibly detailed survey drawing of Toddington in 1581, by Ralph Agas, an outstanding surveyor and map maker. This was originally held at Toddington Manor (but is now in the British Library and, thanks to John, a large facsimile can be viewed in the Learning Zone). This showed in minute detail the field names and landscape features and annotated each field strip usage by individuals, for the purposes of collecting rent. More than that, it also included drawings of the various wild and domesticated farm animals just where they were to be found around the estate. The estate included an area known as

Wadelows, named after Hugh Wadelow who sold the land in 1234 to Paulinus Peyvre who built the Great House there (now no longer in existence) with formal gardens and a deer park, which is shown on the Agas plan.

John's family members have been nurserymen for a number of generations. Jesse Little, John's grandfather, purchased the land on which the Poplars Garden Centre

now stands in 1923. In 2005 John created Wadelows nature reserve to the rear of the commercial building, including a rare uncultivated meadow and ponds which attract a wide range of wildlife. After a buffet lunch, John treated a large number of those attending the symposium to a refreshing guided walk, including a woodland walk, the meadow, some wetland, which holds some rare orchids, and a river walk.



Felicity Brimblecombe, dedicated Secretary of Bedfordshire Gardens Trust, and a volunteer researcher for the Luton Hoo Walled Garden restoration project, presented a very interesting and well-researched talk on Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932), the famous garden designer, outlining her life's work which included some 400 private gardens for middle-class patrons. Felicity concentrated, however, on Jekyll's single commission in Bedfordshire for The Old House in Ickwell, which is still standing. Jekyll developed her own style of informal garden walks and published a book on 'Colour in Flower Gardens', suggesting the use of blocks of colour in planting. She never visited the site of the gardens for which she created designs. She relied on ground surveys to

show levels, plans of the site, photographs of the current gardens and information on the various vistas to be had from rooms in the house. She then drew plans and gave detailed lists of plants for execution by the patrons' own gardeners.

Felicity, through a revealing series of letters between the commissioning owner of the house, (from the Wells brewery family) with Gertrude Jekyll, was able to show how the relationship between the two parties developed over time. Jekyll had strong opinions as to what she preferred and what she did not, such as existing but huge Wellingtonia trees, and there was clearly a battle of wills as to who should prevail. In the end, both the owner and Gertrude got their way to some extent but not all her plans were fully completed.



A surprise component in the afternoon's range of talks was given by **Corinne Price**, an experienced Head Gardener in the past for both the National Trust and English Heritage and currently Swiss Garden and Grounds Manager at The Swiss Garden at Shuttleworth. She gave insights into the world of current professional gardeners, including the wide-range of professional technical and management skills required. She also pointed out how isolated professional gardeners can be, particularly in small gardens, and some of the range of support which they can seek, but at a price. Corinne's contribution in Bedfordshire has been to establish, for the first time, a self-help Bedfordshire Head Gardeners Network, building it up from an initial 6 responses from the 20 who were invited, to a current membership of 11, with a further 4 expected to join soon. They all agree that

by meeting three times a year, hosting in rotation, they gain both moral support and know-how from each other and are also better able to respond to common and local problems relating to plant disease and security alerts, plant swaps, recommendations on plant suppliers and information on training and job opportunities. Corinne made a persuasive case for the role of head gardeners, together with special advisors, in garden conservation, as well as in working together across the Bedfordshire landscape.



The final speaker needed no introduction to local historians; few people know as much as **Stephen Coleman** about the archaeology and history of Bedfordshire. Currently the Historic Environment Information Officer for Central Bedfordshire Council, he previously worked for the former County Council. He shared his detailed knowledge on 'Flitwick Manor Park and Grounds: a 19th Century Visitor Attraction and Botanic Treasure House'. The Brooks family, which owned the house, developed what began as an agricultural park surrounding the Manor into a landscaped park in the 18th century.

Successive generations into the 19th century became more and more ambitious, surrounding it with a fence to allow a deer park, adding 'pleasure grounds', a cascade, 'ruined' folly,

grotto, fish pond, labyrinth, an arboretum of specimen trees, an orchard and fruit garden, a pinetum, an American garden, and adding a range of rare plants. At its height, by 1881, it aspired to rival national collections such as that at Kew. The family promoted the gardens and park to visitors by producing maps of 'colour-coded' walks which would take in different aspects of the horticultural and landscape delights. Sadly, as family fortunes waned, there followed a slow decline. Little now remains of this once extensive attraction.

Some sixty local historians and enthusiasts attended the Symposium, representing the following 15 local history societies (as well as a number of individual BLHA members and the County Archivist, Pamela Birch): Ampthill & District Archaeological & Local History Society, Bedford Architectural, Archaeological & Local History Society [BAALHS], Bedfordshire Family History Society, Bedfordshire Gardens Trust, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, Clapham Historical Society, Harlington Heritage Trust, Leighton Buzzard & District Archaeological and Historical Society, Maypole Heritage, Old Warden History and Heritage Society, Potton History Society, Sharnbrook Local History Society, Toddington Historical Society, Willington Local History Group, Wrest Park Volunteer History Research Team.

Kevin Levitt, Chair of the Bedfordshire Gardens Trust, and his small team are to be congratulated on a smoothly-run event which offered a well-balanced programme of stimulating and informative lectures, started on time and finished on time.

Bob Ricketts announced that **next year's BLHA conference** will be hosted by Bedfordshire Historical Record Society (supported by BAALHS) at Priory Methodist Church, 63 Newnham Avenue, Bedford, MK41 9QJ on the theme of 'The Home Front in Bedfordshire during the First and Second World Wars'. The date for your diary is: **Saturday, 20th June 2020**.

Report and photographs by Stuart Antrobus