

“ODD WHIMS”

*or,*

How, and why, and when, farmland became park land in Havering.

By Andrew Curtin.

**I’ve taken the title for this article from the title of a play by our very own Humphry Repton, which was called “Odd Whims, or two at a time”.**

The play was premiered at the New Theatre in Ipswich in 1803, and it does have to be said that this seems to have been its only performance ever.

The play meanders over five tortuous acts, and when I boldly suggested the idea of reviving it recently, I was met with horror by members of Havering’s intrepid amateur drama community!

Repton would have been horrified by this. He was an inveterate snob, but he was our inveterate snob and, apart from being one of the greatest landscape gardeners of Regency England, he also spent most of his adult life in Havering - living at the junction of what are now Balgores Lane and Main Road in Romford. He designed some of the greatest landscapes in England, including coming up with the first designs for the Prince Regent’s outrageous pavilion in Brighton, and he had a whole chapter devoted to him in William Makepeace Thackeray’s “Little Book of Snobs”.

This is a drawing by Repton of the view from his cottage in Gidea Park. Or rather, I should say, this is the view from his cottage after he had “improved” it! This is what it actually looked like, and you can see that people who look suspiciously like they might have been local were airbrushed out of the improved version!!! It’s not for nothing that there was a whole chapter on Repton in the “Little Book of Snobs”!!

The title of Repton’s ill-fated play does, though, seem to me to be a rather good starting point - as turning farmland into park land could, perhaps, be seen as a very “odd whim” indeed!

This is a map of Havering from the early seventeenth century. It’s a schematic version of a map held in Essex Records Office.

Havering existed, looking just like this, from the mid-eleventh century before the Battle of Hastings in 1066, to the end of the nineteenth century. It was a royal manor and then, from at least 1465, a royal liberty. It was bordered by the River Ingrebourne, which now runs through Hornchurch Country Park, in the east, and the Beam River in the west. We can see Hornchurch in its centre, Romford slightly to the west, Bretons Manor House in the south, and Havering-atte-Bower in the north.

Rainham and Upminster were just outside of the Manor and the Liberty, but both were closely linked to it.

Rainham was joined to Havering by Rainham Bridge at Dovers Corner. Pilgrim routes probably ran through Hornchurch to Rainham in the Middle Ages, much as were described by Geoffrey Chaucer in “The Canterbury Tales”, before pilgrims crossed the Thames using the Rainham Ferry. The Manor of Upminster was given to the monks of Waltham Abbey by Harold Godwinson shortly before the Battle of Hastings. Upminster Manor may well have been popular because of the excellent views that it had of the royal palaces around Havering-atte-Bower - a rather unfortunate association for Harold, because he was famously shot in the eye at the Battle of Hastings.....

Saxon and Norman Havering spread over the sixth to the twelfth centuries. By the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, courtly walled gardens would have been planted in fortified houses such as Gidea Hall and Marks Lodge near Romford, the palaces at Havering-atte-Bower, and many other places. Large landscaped gardens were unheard of at the time, and the political circumstances were not favourable for them.

In the 1470s the owner of Gidea Hall, Sir Thomas Cooke, became a national "cause celebre" when he had his estate arbitrarily seized from him by the King. Even before this he had been planning to rebuild the old thirteenth century hall with special places from which to pour boiling oil and water on any unwanted guests. These were hardly auspicious circumstances for landscape gardening.....

In the sixteenth century all this changed, however.

This is a drawing of Gidea Hall in the mid-seventeenth century, and we can clearly see an open landscape and laid-out gardens in it. Descriptions of the hall sixty or seventy years earlier, in the late sixteenth century, however, give an even more tantalising hint of what the Tudor gardens may have been like. The hall was described by a courtier visiting it with the all-powerful Lord Burghley, chief minister to Elizabeth I. The courtier said; "And what a house did I find there! Yea rather a small university! In truth while staying there I seemed to be living in a Tusculan villa, except only that in this Tusculan villa the industry of the females was in full vigour".

This is significant, because to an educated Tudor courtier the phrase "Tusculan villa" - by which he meant Tuscan villa - would have meant elegant and refined gardens, as well as the other things that the Italian region of Tuscany was associated with in the mind of an elegant Tudor courtier.

Tuscany was the home of the Italian Renaissance, and the gardens of Castello, planted for the Grand Duke of Tuscany in the middle of the sixteenth century, were considered among the finest in Europe.

These references are made all the more tantalising by the assertion of George Terry, a nineteenth-century historian of Romford, that Sir Anthony Cooke - the then owner of Gidea Hall - had a verse ending with the words, "my house, my groves, and meadows green shall sing thy eulogies", written on the front of his house to mark a visit by Elizabeth I in 1568. The landscape was important to the owners of the house.

Clearly there is much fascinating work to be done on the landscape of Tudor Havering, and the gardens of houses such as Bretons Manor House in the south of the borough, the palaces at Havering-atte-Bower, and Gidea Hall (among other places) but I think that some reasons can be suggested as to why grand gardens might have been planted here.

I would argue that the first reason would be the improved political situation in the Tudor period. The period was calmer than had been the case before, and so people did not have to worry that their land might be confiscated at any time.

Secondly, the ideas of the Renaissance were spreading to Britain through exactly the sort of well-educated, refined families as the Cookes at Gidea Hall.

The Cookes were very well educated. Their funerary monument in St. Edward's Church in Romford Market is

replete with references to the new classical learning that was being revived during the Renaissance. Sir Anthony Cooke himself was a philosopher and had verses in Greek, Latin and Hebrew written on the front of his house. His daughters and wife were also very well read. One daughter translated church texts from Greek, another corresponded with a senior Church of England bishop entirely in Greek! Repton would have had his work cut out trying to keep up with these people!!! In addition to this, one of Cooke's daughters endowed scholarships at Cambridge University. As an aside, the education of the Cooke daughters is an important part of the history of education in Havering. Their learning seems clearly to be an important part of the democratisation of learning, which continued with the establishment of St. Edward's School in Romford and Dame Tipping School in Havering-atte-Bower in the early eighteenth century.

The Cookes did not need to rely on farming to make a living, thus freeing up their land for other, more luxurious, purposes. But there were also other reasons as to why it was at these sites that graceful gardens were planted in the sixteenth century.

The regular presence of the Court and monarch in the north of Havering would have been an important attraction to families such as the Cookes, who made some of their money from teaching the royal children. Secondly, there were negative pressures, particularly in the area around Hornchurch, contributing to those lands remaining as farmland rather than being turned into gardens. In Hornchurch it should be suggested that the ownership of much of the land around the village by New College, Oxford, mitigated strongly against use of the land for any purpose other than farming. The point of the land was to provide an income for the college through farming, and so the idea of losing some of this in order to plant a fine garden would not have found favour. Thirdly, Romford had comparatively better road links than other parts of Havering, and so it was easier for families like the Cookes to live in Romford and still receive fashionable visitors from other parts of the country than it was in many other parts of Havering, with significant exceptions such as Bretons Manor House in the south.

The Tudor period ended with the death of Elizabeth I in 1603. After this, very significant botanical gardens were planted by William Coys at Stubbers near Upminster by the early seventeenth century. It would be absolutely fascinating to do more work on these gardens. There was also a large, now lost, estate at Stewards in Romford, near where Stewards Walk, South Street and Victoria Road are now. In the early eighteenth century, gardens were planted at Rainham Hall, and at the same time a very significant landscape was laid out by Charles Bridgeman at Bower House in Havering-atte-Bower.

At the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, we find a veritable cornucopia of new gardens and landscapes being planted throughout Havering.

New gardens were laid out at Langtons in Hornchurch, Gaynes Manor House in Upminster and Dagnams in what is now Harold Hill, as well as there being yet another revamp of the landscape at Gidea Hall. All of these, apart from Gidea Hall, entailed the direct transformation of farm land into park land.

There were a number of factors contributing to this, but it has to be suggested that the result of the English Civil War over a hundred years earlier in the seventeenth century, was one of the most important.

On one level, the defeat of the Royalists resulted in the confiscation of Royalist estates. In some cases, such as at Gidea Hall, the owners were moderate Royalists and their land was merely sold to new owners who then went on to stamp their own taste on the landscape. At others (such as Stewards) the estates were completely destroyed.

It would also be worth considering the extent to which the Royalist defeat resulted in a decline in the influence of New College, Oxford, on land in Hornchurch, thus opening the way for non-farming uses, such as parks and gardens, around the village.

Oxford was the centre for the Royalist forces during the Civil War, and whether the defeat of the Royalists led to a decline in the influence of Oxford colleges is something that it would be very good to examine in the Oxford archives.

In addition to this, there were new forms of trade and further changes in transport in Havering, which allowed people to make their money other than from farming, and still allowed them to travel outside of the borough to London and other centres.

As a further aside, the history of Havering during the Civil War is also something that would benefit from further study.

In general, East Anglia, Essex and London were Parliamentary strongholds, but this may not have been the case in Havering. In 1637 Marie de Medici, Mother-in-Law of Charles I and Queen of France, stayed at Gidea Hall on the way to London. In general, it seems that she was very unpopular, and some historians report that when she finally arrived in London there was a riot, which forced her from the city. In Havering, however, contemporary accounts report that she was well received when she stayed here, as was her retinue which was put up in Romford itself. In 1653, during the Commonwealth, there was reportedly a riot in Romford against the new Parliamentary government. Balancing this, however, there were also senior Parliamentarians in Havering. The owners of Marks Manor and Great Gobions near Romford were both colonels in the Parliamentary army. The situation is tantalising, and it might be worth considering whether the direct relationship of Havering to the monarchy through the Royal Liberty had an important influence on opinion in the area.

To return to the subject of landscape gardening, however, in the more peaceable late-eighteenth century Sir James Esdaile took advantage of improved transport links to buy the old farm estate of Gaynes just south of Upminster. He began its transformation into the graceful and refined landscape park that is now the basis of Parklands Park in Corbets Tey Road.

At Dagnams in what is now Harold Hill, the Neave family bought the estate at about the same time as Esdaile was buying Gaynes. The Neaves laid their landscape out in the latest fashion and went on to be patrons of the painters Gainsborough, Reynolds and Lawrence. They also employed Repton to design the estate, but they made their money from plantations in the West Indies, much as the owners of Gidea Hall had done since the late seventeenth century, and this is also something which it would be good to know more about.

In Hornchurch, the Langtons Estate - near the site of the Saxon village of Langdun by the River Ravensbourne - was bought by the Huguenot Massu family at the end of the eighteenth century. Making their money from the silk trade, the Massus too were able to turn their farmland into park land, probably employing Repton to help design a charming Regency landscape around their reshaped Palladian villa part of which is now Langtons Gardens. Improvements in the road system would also seem to have been instrumental in the development of Langtons.

One of the main changes the Massus made was to move the entry to Langtons from Billet Lane to

Hornchurch Road. It would be enormous fun to know whether the Massus planted a row of trees along the edge of Hornchurch Road to screen it off just as the owners of Gidea Hall seem to have done along what is now Main Road in Gidea Park. Hornchurch Road was the main track for cattle and livestock to travel to Romford from Hornchurch, the south of Havering, Upminster and Rainham. I think we can assume that it was noisy, smelly and had all the other charms that livestock leave behind them while travelling.

In conclusion, the history of the development of parks and landscape gardening in Havering is a fascinating subject, and in this brief introduction I haven't been able even to begin to touch on the development of public parks in Havering in the early twentieth century. The development of King George's Playing Fields on Eastern Avenue as part of the King George's Playing Fields movement after the Silver Jubilee of King George V, for example, had an important part in this, but I do hope that this was a useful introduction to a development that was, perhaps, an "odd whim" indeed.