

LEICESTERSHIRE
AND RUTLAND
GARDENS
TRUST



REPORT ON THE HISTORY OF
THE GARDENS AT
LAUNDE ABBEY

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INDEX

INDEX	1
REPORT ON THE HISTORY OF THE GARDENS AT LAUNDE ABBEY	3
Introduction:	3
The Site:	3
A Chronological History of the Garden:	3
Recommendations on future development for the Gardens	13
Areas for possible further research	13
Bibliography	14
Appendix 1: Plan of Launde – extracted from John C. Hughes ‘History of the Abbey’	15
Appendix 2: English Heritage Listings Relating To The Gardens At Launde	16
Appendix 3: Thomas Rickman Diaries	17
Appendix 4: Ordnance Survey Maps	18
Appendix 5: Information Contained In Dawson Archive At County Record Office	21
Appendix 6: Notes of Interview with Mrs. Pepper, Granddaughter of Harry Gould, gardener during the 1950’s/60s	22
Appendix 7: Notes Of Interview With John Sills – Gardener At Launde Abbey - 1985-2003.	23

REPORT ON THE HISTORY OF THE GARDENS AT LAUNDE ABBEY

Introduction:

In autumn 2007, you approached the Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust and asked us to undertake some research into the history of the gardens at Launde Abbey. This is in the light of your plans to carry out certain building work and developments in the garden. You are concerned that any work undertaken should be sensitive to any historic features, relating either to the Abbey or to subsequent garden archaeology.

You are specifically interested in two key periods and would like to find out more about the nature of the garden at the time that the 17th century house was created and also when substantial work was carried out on the house by Thomas Rickman in the late 1820's

The Site:

Launde Abbey is a large country house built on the site of the Augustinian Priory of St. John the Baptist. The priory was founded in the early 12th century and was converted to a manor house in the early 17th century, using parts of the former buildings. Substantial remodelling of the house occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries. In addition to the house, there is an 18th century stable block. The property is now a Church of England retreat house and conference centre. The house, chapel and stable block are Grade II* listed.

Launde Abbey is situated in the countryside in a sheltered and isolated location. It is surrounded by attractive landscaped gardens and parkland containing mature trees. The grounds to the north and west of the house are a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The Ha-ha, walled garden and glass houses are all Grade II listed.

A Chronological History of the Garden:

We have presented our findings on the history of the gardens in chronological sequence. This is cross-referenced to Appendices, containing copies of maps, plans and other source material. Relevant information relating to work in the house is also included, but this is in italics.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| c. 1125 | Priory was founded by the Black Canons of the order of St. Augustine. |
| Augustinian period | The landscape at Launde was a complicated one – reflecting the economic structure at the time. It was a minor royal forest. In 1235, the Abbot requested permission to create a deer park as the forest was contracting in size. In 1248 this was awarded and it continued as a park until the dissolution. Park Wood was the site of the park which extended to West Wood. This remained virtually unchanged for centuries. |

There were a number of Fishponds dating from this time– linked to the use of the property as a priory, pre-dating private residential use of house – including one pond in the location of present-day sunken garden. See plan in Appendix 1.



This illustration drawn by Schnebbelie for John Nichols' History shows water extending to the rear of the Abbey in the location of the present-day sunken garden. C.1800

- 1539** Launde Priory was dissolved
- 1603** There was a reference to the “site of Launde” – so the house had not yet been built
- C 1611** The house was probably built around this date for the then owner, William Halford
- 17th century** During the 17th century it is possible that there were formal gardens to the west front of the house.

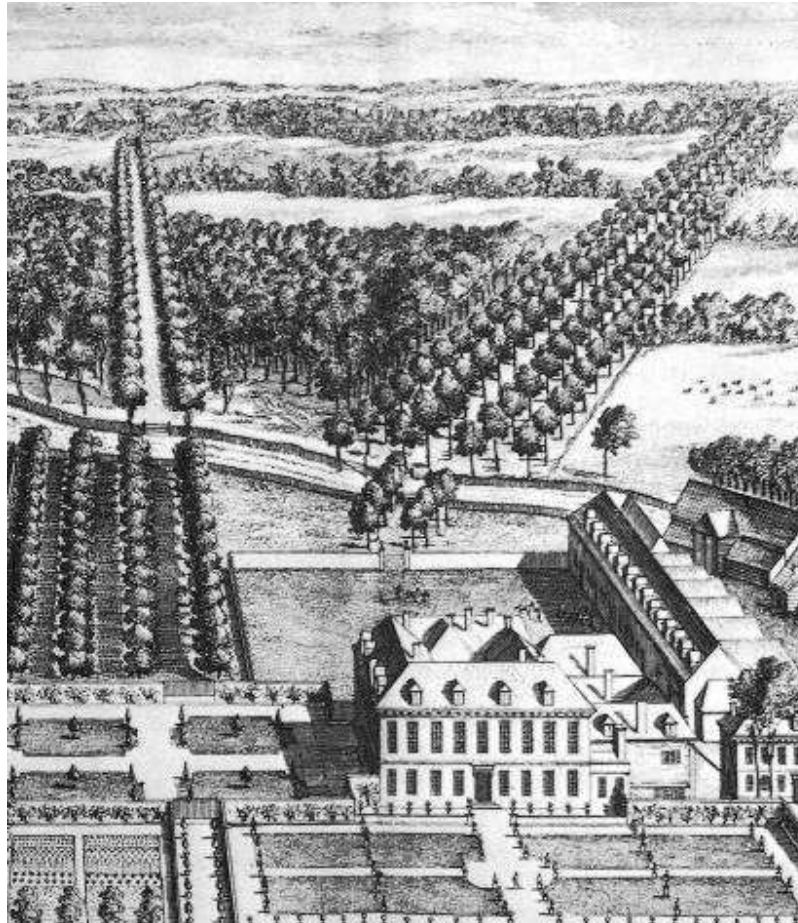
The evidence for this is a terrace shown on the plan in Appendix 1 (Tony Squires/Len Cantor) also Fred Hartley's earthworks survey. This is an area where formal gardens may have been 'smoothed over' with the change in fashion to the landscape movement. According to Fred Hartley (Leicester Museums Service) there might have been avenues of trees and bushes, with formal ponds, extending from the house. He states that this is an area with archaeological potential.

The University of Leicester's Geophysical and Building Survey (Beavitt) mentions possible circular flower bed at front. This could possibly have formed part of the formal garden. (Alternatively, it could have dated from a later garden during the early 1800's).

In addition, former gardener, John Sills mentioned a photograph he saw, dating from 1920's/30's showing an archaeological excavation at the front of the house with evidence of some steps. These might possibly

have related to the formal garden.

This formal garden (if the theory is correct) had disappeared by the time that John Nichols visited and the garden was illustrated in 1800. This would tie in with the changes brought about by the landscape movement. It is very unusual anywhere in the country for any remnants of (pre-landscape movement) formal gardens to remain.



This illustration of Dawley, in Middlesex, shows avenues of trees extending from the house. The design is on a much grander scale than would have been likely at Launde.

- 1765** The estate passed into the hands of the Simpson family.
- Late 18th century** The stable block was built (in the time of John Simpson, High Sheriff) – probably mid-18th century
- Modernisation of the house started around this date – *The staircase handrail is late 18th century*
- 1795 -1 815** John Nichols produced his eight volume: “History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester”.

1800

John Nichols' description of Launde in his County History



These two illustrations from Nichols date from 1800. It is interesting to note that one shows a fence in front of the house; in the other, it is absent.

Early 19th century

The Ha-ha and stone urns date from this period. This seems quite late as the ha-ha was popular in the mid-18th century in order to give the

impression of the landscape sweeping right up to the house. However, by the early 19th century, the fashion was to reinstate the terrace, often enriched with flower beds and it may be that this area is more in the nature of a ‘terrace’ along these lines.

The ha-ha at Launde is also surprisingly low. Neil Finn from the University comments on this in his report. Recent excavations have revealed that it originally extended only 0.10 metres lower than the present height. In the 1950’s, photographs exist showing wire on the top to keep the sheep out.

The kitchen garden walls, greenhouse, and ice house also date from this period. (see English Heritage listing – Appendix 2)

The panelling in the hall dates from this period

C 1820

Dining room refurbished.

Library and drawing room, door cases and an Adam style fireplace

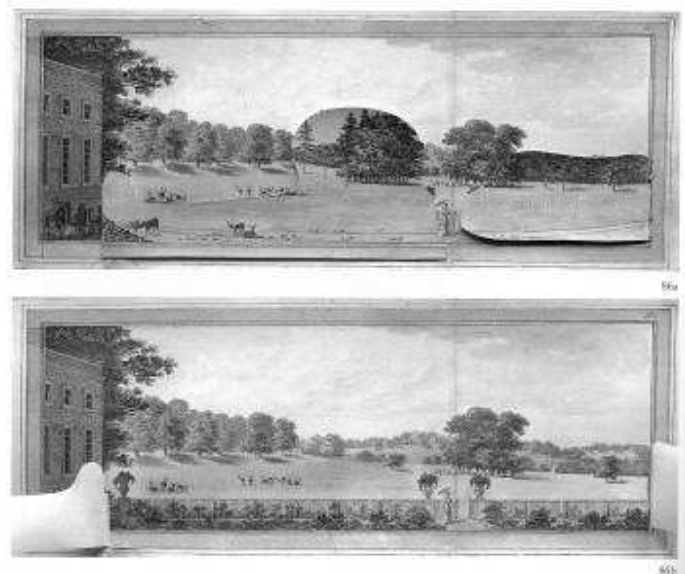
1828

Edward Dawson married Mary Finch Simpson

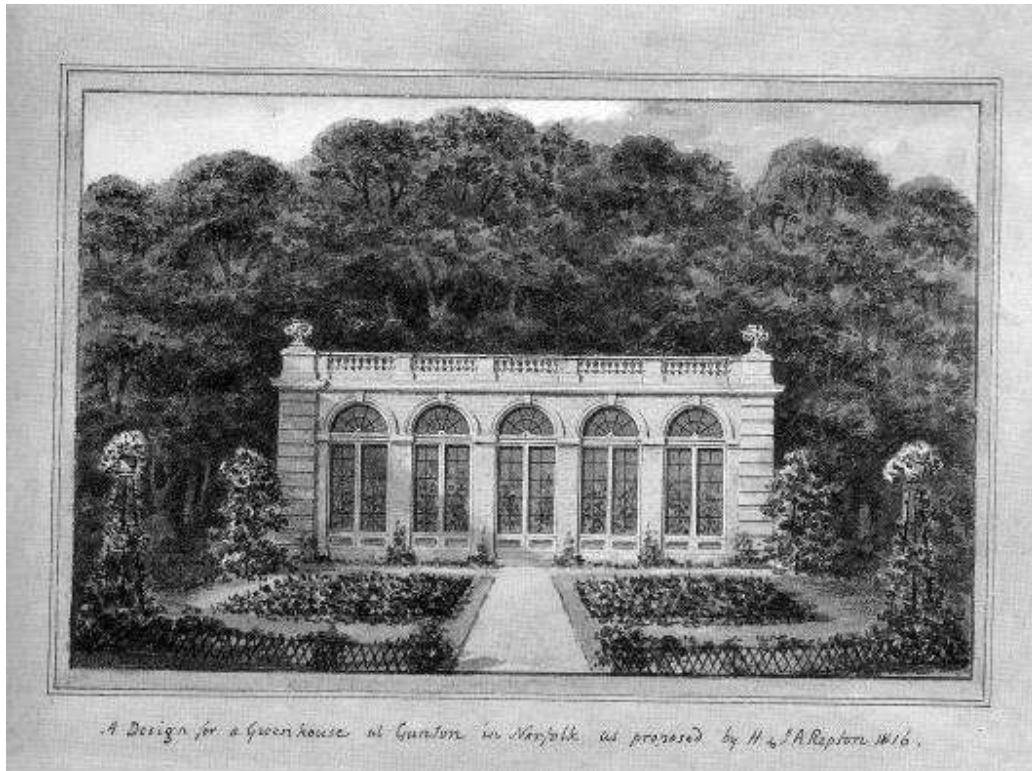
1829

Thomas Rickman carried out work on the house

See Appendix 3: Rickman diaries at V & A



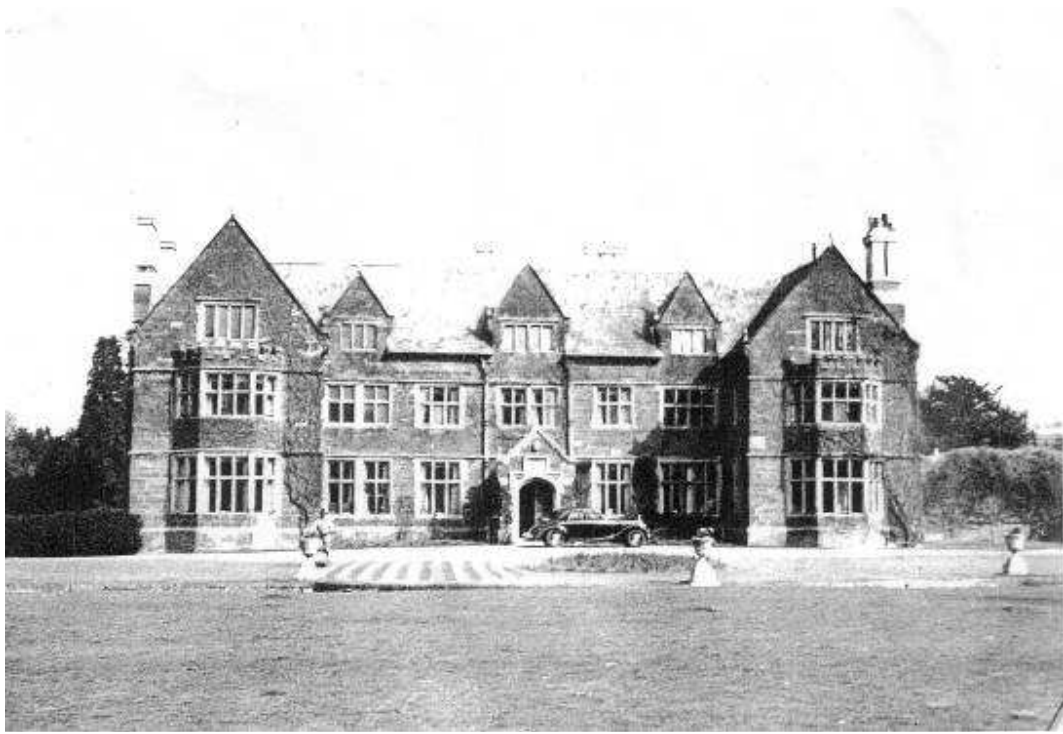
This illustration from 1801 shows ‘before and after’ views of Wimpole, Cambridgeshire, where the landscaping was by Humphrey Repton. The top picture shows the parkland sweeping right up to the house; in the bottom, a terrace area has been created. The terrace at Launde might have been like this.



This illustration, by Humphrey Repton, of a design for a greenhouse (dated 1816) shows the elaborate nature of planting design in the late Georgian period. “Flower baskets” and containerized planting were the order of the day.

- 19th Century** The Dawson Family owned Launde throughout Victorian period.
- 1840** The chapel was restored by William Railton – (Gothic revival style)
- 1853** Wellingtonia (tree) introduced into UK The specimen at Launde could date from any time after this.
- 1860’s onwards** The mature trees in the garden: Our (very approximate) dating of the copper beech tree and the Cedar of Lebanon show them to be about 150 years old. However, former gardener, John Sills reported that he felled a copper beech similar to the remaining tree and counted the tree rings. He dated it to c.1900. This would be a more likely date for the remaining beech – given the location of the fountain in the sunken garden (see below – 1904). Otherwise, the fountain would have been too close to the tree.
- 1861** February 27th: Letter from Edward Dawson to his brother: “I am going to begin at once the terrace in front of the house, and I hope by the beginning of May to have it fit to put flowers in. I am also going to move the drying ground next summer, to the place where the present garden is, and make a flower border similar to the south house.... I am busy moving evergreens now”

- There are believed to have been 8 gardeners during the heyday of the gardens.
- 1865** October 10th. Diary of Laura de Lisle — mention of playing “croquet all the afternoon”. This could have taken place on the site of the subsequent tennis court or on the level area above the sunken garden.
- 1875 onwards** Lawn tennis became a popular sport and began to replace croquet as the summer sport. The tennis court could date from any time after this.
- Late Victorian/Edwardian period** The sunken garden gives the appearance of dating from this period. The wall and steps have an ‘Arts and Crafts’ style appearance.
John Shillaker was head gardener. His daughter wrote in 1977:
“The gardens were beautiful in those days. Father did a lot of carpet bedding and the greenhouses had peaches, grapes, melons and plants of all kinds...”
- 1904** The OS map shows a fountain in the sunken garden (see Appendix 4)
The Geophysical and Building Survey carried out at Launde between 1989-1992 shows a circular feature in this location – possibly the remains of a flower bed. This could have surrounded the fountain.
The 1904 map shows a circular building (possibly a summer house) where the ‘Oxford and Cambridge’ is currently located. This appears to be replaced by a rectangular building (likely to be the Oxford and Cambridge) by 1930.
The 1904 map shows a network of gravel paths and the present gardener at Launde (Karen) has confirmed that she has found traces of the gravel when digging in these areas. These include a path all the way round the outside of the walled garden. This was still in existence in 1930 but is not shown in 1959. There is also current evidence of orchard trees along the south-facing outside wall of the walled garden.
- Early 20th century** A reminiscence of the gardens by a granddaughter of one of the gardeners: “the grapes were delicious, seedless. I remember there were peaches on the walls, the lovely smell of phlox and the asphalt paths, and the old bothy where we had to take father’s dinner sometimes”
- 1932** Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Tait leased Launde as hunting box – he wrote that he had 3 gardeners. By this time, the gardens were obviously past their peak.



Judging by the car, this photograph dates from the 1930's. There is no evidence of any elaborate planting schemes at the front of the house.



This view, looking across the sunken garden at the back, shows some planting, as well as the steps that were removed by gardener, John Sills, in the 1990's.

1947

Sale details appeared in Country Life. Description of garden:

“Pleasure grounds, hard tennis court, walled kitchen garden. Orchard. Parkland. About 45 acres with vacant possession”

1940’s

Aerial photographs of the grounds at Launde were taken. Given the generally poor state of maintenance, it is likely that these date to the period shortly after the war. There are vegetables growing in the walled garden, which would have been likely at this time. Various points of interest to note are: the position of the tennis court and also the ‘pavilion’ alongside the court. The position is not as described by John Sills. The path running parallel with the back of the house (alongside the sunken garden) is visible.



The view clearly shows the tennis court and ‘viewing’ shelter



The view shows line of path, running parallel with back of house and sunken garden

- 1954** Sale Catalogue in the Dawson archive (Appendix 5)
 "... attractive and easily maintained gardens."
 "An Elizabethan type mansion, surrounded by fine pleasure grounds and plantations, situated in a finely timbered park"
 "Lawns; flower and rose beds and walled kitchen garden"
- 1959** The OS map (Appendix 4) shows the garden greatly simplified. There are fewer structures in the working area by the bothies.
- 1950's-60's** Harry Gould was the sole gardener. His granddaughter, Mrs. Pepper was interviewed and gave her childhood recollections of the garden. (see Appendix 6)
- 1980s onwards** John Sills, former gardener, has been interviewed. His oral history and recollections appear as Appendix 7

This completes the research that we have been able to undertake to date. Sadly the information on the key periods of interest can only be described as ‘sketchy’ but this is not surprising, given the ephemeral nature of garden history.

Recommendations on future development for the Gardens

Given the limited resources for managing the garden, we feel that it is important at all times, to simplify the design, avoiding ‘island beds’ and areas which create difficulties for mowing and maintenance. This could include removing the circular bed from the front terrace, which we feel does not enhance the front façade.

Reinstate gravel path running parallel with the back of the house.

Mark the outline of the lines of the priory in stone

It would be possible to reinstate the fountain in the sunken garden area, though it would need to be repositioned to be further away from the beech tree. This is an example of Edwardian style fountain which would be in keeping:



Areas for possible further research

Investigate the Rickman diaries in the RIBA archive at the V & A (See Appendix 3)
Neil Finn from the University of Leicester mentions in correspondence that he believes that there are documents relating to expenditure on the gardens, although he has not been able to study them in detail. This would obviously be another interesting area to explore.

Bibliography

Launde Abbey 'The Story of the Abbey' - John C. Hughes 1998

"History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester" Vol. 3 Part 1 (East Goscote Hundred) John Nichols

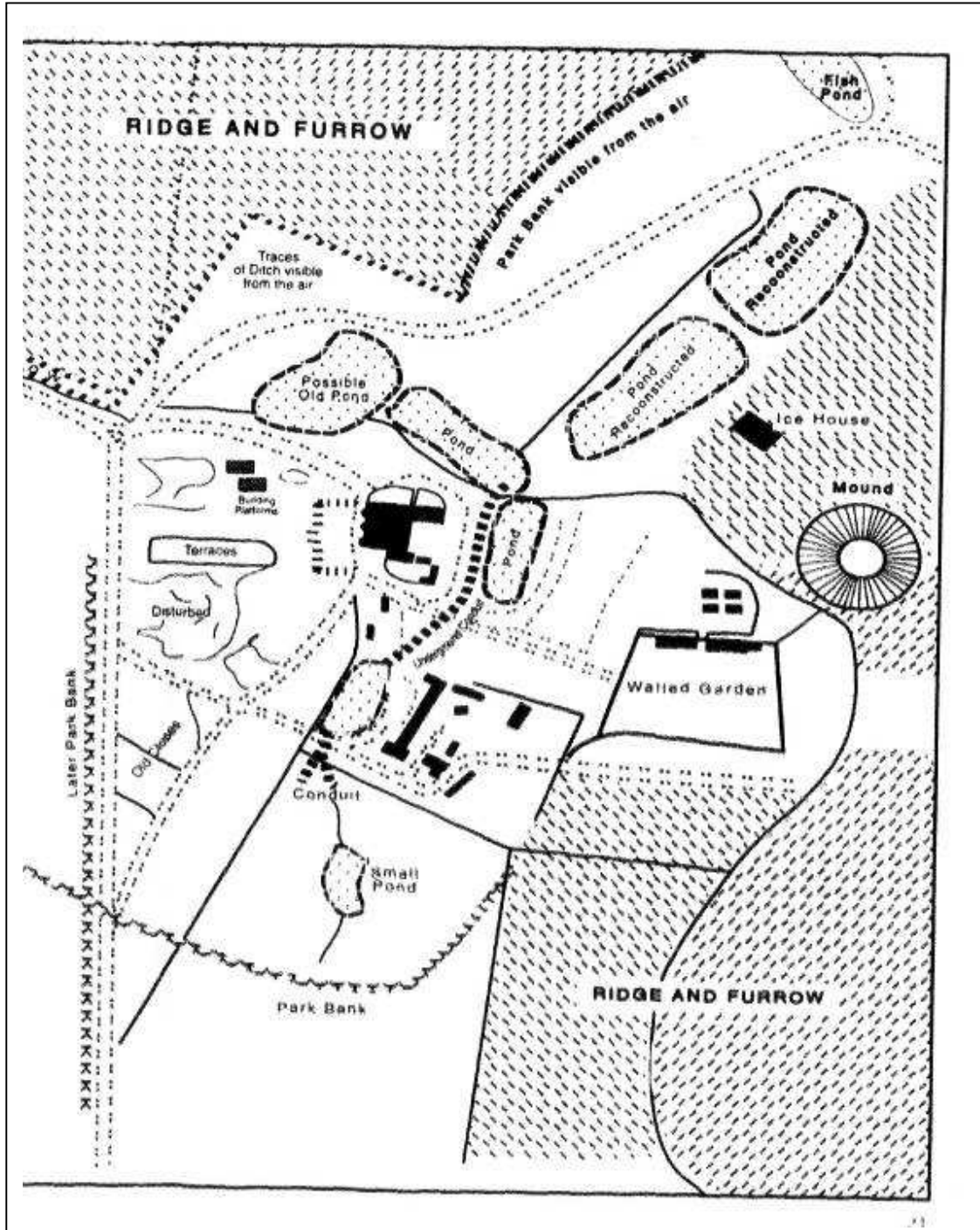
The Historic Parks and Gardens of Leicestershire and Rutland – Len Cantor and Tony Squires

Geophysical and Building Survey at Launde Abbey – Paul Beavitt (Leicester University – School of Archaeological Studies)

An Archaeological Evaluation of the Ha-ha and stable block at Launde Abbey, Launde, Leicestershire. Andrew Hyma April 2007. University of Leicester Archaeological Services..

The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland – Nicolaus Pevsner

Appendix 1: Plan of Launde – extracted from John C. Hughes 'History of the Abbey'



PLAN OF LAUNDE – EXTRACTED FROM JOHN C. HUGHES HISTORY OF THE ABBEY

Appendix 2: English Heritage Listings Relating To The Gardens At Launde

Location: Launde Abbey : Ha ha and urns

Ha ha and urns GV II Ha ha. Early C19. Coursed ironstone rubble with brick coping, forming a curving terrace in front of the house, and capped by a series of ornamental stone urns.

Location: LAUNDE ABBEY WALLS TO KITCHEN GARDEN AND ATTACHED CAST IRON GREENHOUSE,

Date listed: 24 January 1985

Date of last amendment: 10 February 1989

Grade II

LAUNDE ROAD Launde Abbey Walls to Kitchen Garden and attached cast-iron greenhouse The following shall be added at the end of the description: Greenhouse. Late C18/early C19. Brick plinth with stone coping and cast-iron and glass. Long lean-to roof now of plastic corrugated sheeting. At lowest point at front are 20 small sections each of 10 panes with cast-iron glazing bars. The sides and partition walls have multiple narrow uprights with overlap- ping panes between. Part-glazed doors. Interior: the main struts of the roof frame remain and are supported on very slender cast-iron columns. Brick benches and planters and stone and tile floors. 3 niches in the main garden wall which retains its hypocaust heating tunnels at this point. The other greenhouse of wood and the bothies to rear of the main greenhouse behind the wall are not of special architectural interest.

Location: LAUNDE SK 70 SE LAUNDE ROAD

Launde Abbey 5/48 Walls to Kitchen Garden GV II Wall. Early C19. Brick with tiled coping. Circa 10' high and forming a large square enclosure.

Location: Ice House (North East of Launde Abbey)

II Ice House. Probably early C19. Brick. Built into natural slope above lake, with now roofless west facing entrance passage and outer retaining walls. Segmentally arched opening to earth covered chamber with high threshold now damaged. The domed cavity walled brick chamber is egg shaped inside and c14' diameter.

Appendix 3: Thomas Rickman Diaries

These are available to view in the RIBA Study Rooms at the V & A. The journals are indexed according to date and are as follows:

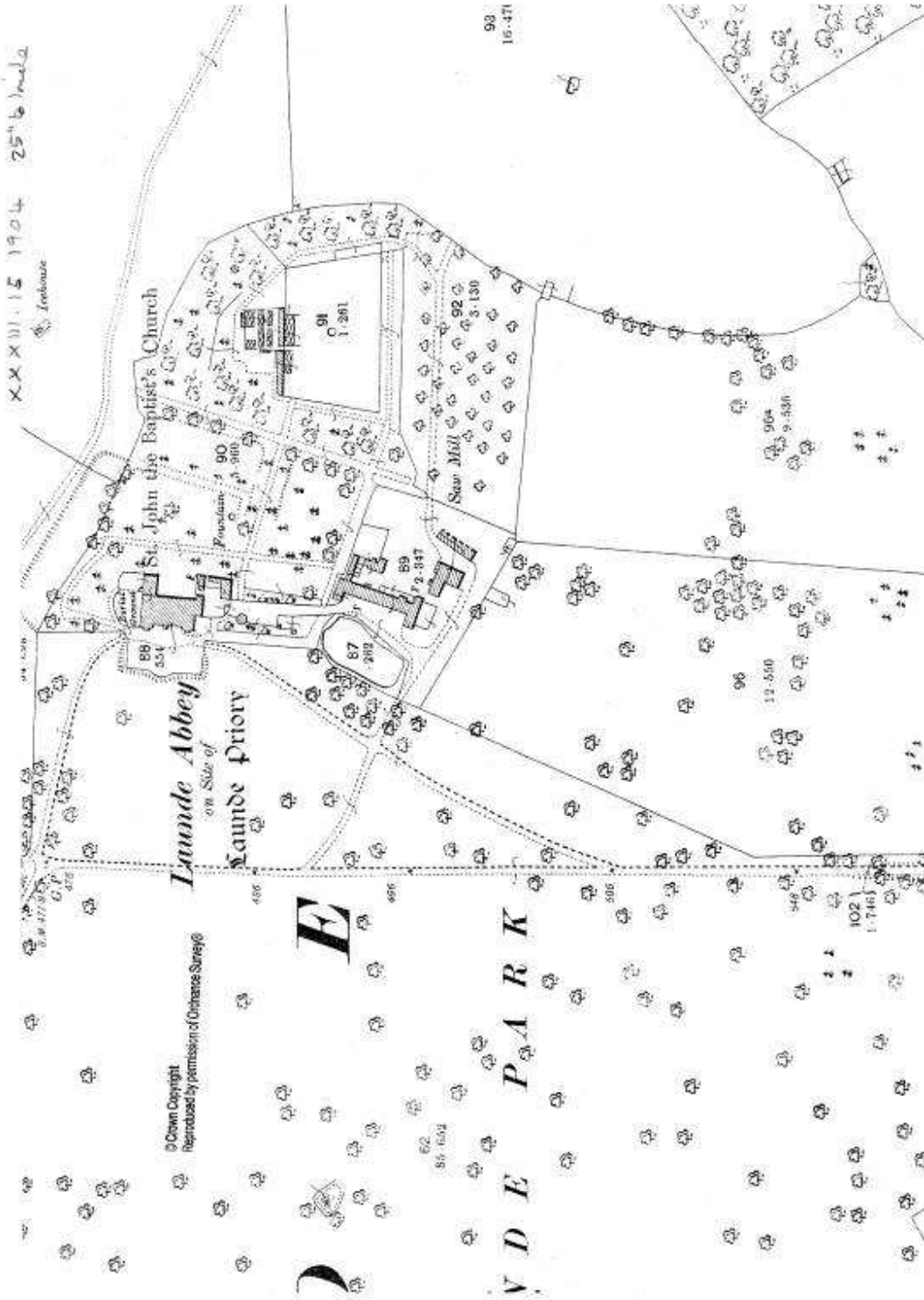
RiT/1 Diaries 1807-15
RiT/2 Diaries 1816-24
RiT/3 Diaries 1825-34

The catalogue entry is as follows:

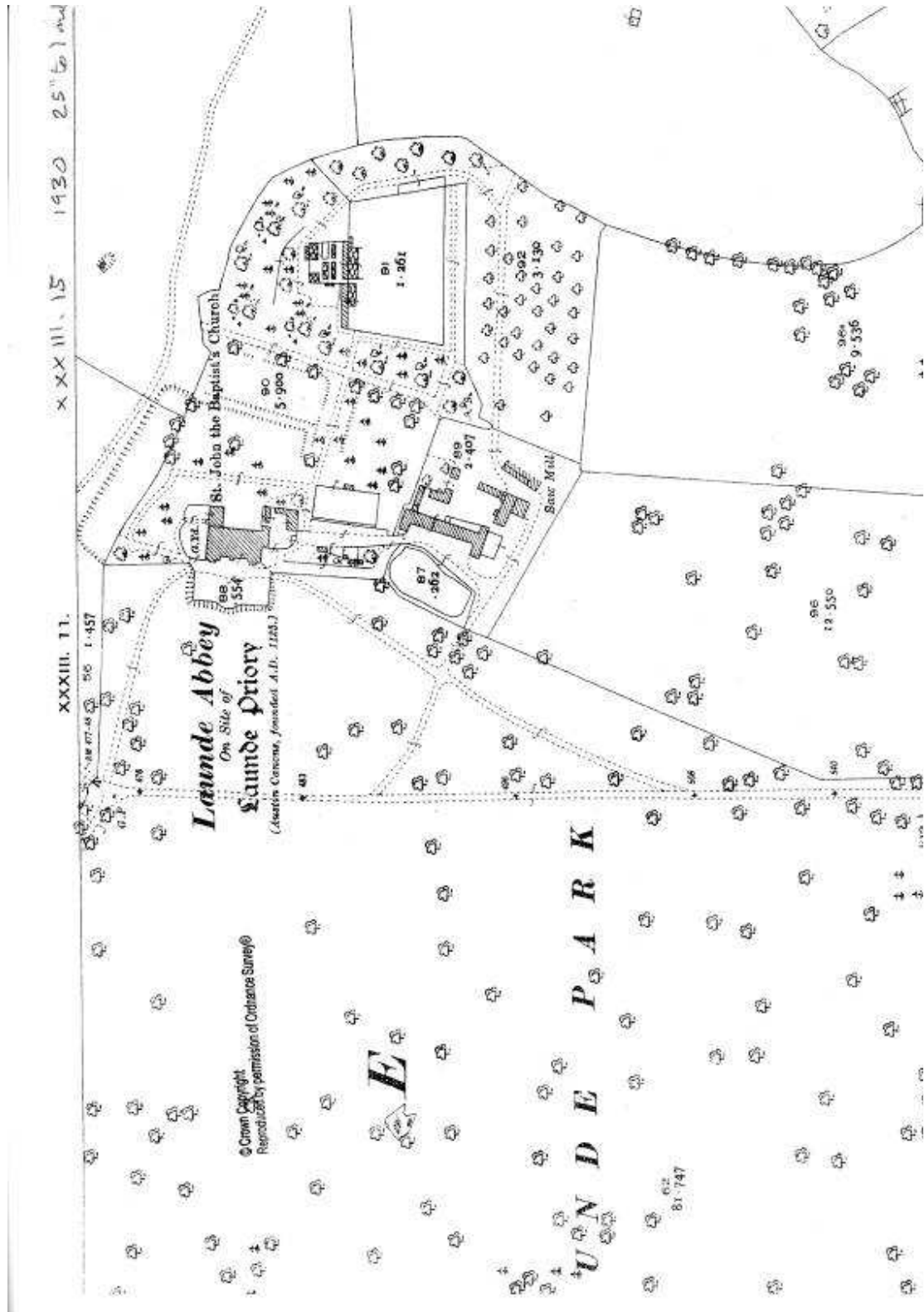
<p>RiT/1-3 Thomas Rickman's personal journals, 1807-1834 3 boxes, 57 volumes, manuscripts</p> <hr/> <p>Personal name: Rickman, Thomas, 1776-1841 Title: Thomas Rickman's personal journals, 1807-1834 Collection context: Forms part of the Thomas Rickman papers Physical description: 3 boxes, 57 volumes, manuscripts Contents: Covering most of his working life, they provide a great deal of information on his buildings; his working methods; his travels round the country inspecting work in progress; his family and personal life. They include some notes, drafts of letters and accounts. [Rickman worked for much of this period in partnership with Henry Hutchinson and the practice, which was based in Liverpool and Birmingham, was particularly noted for building churches in the Gothic Revival style, many of them in the West Midlands region for the Church Building Commissioners.] Order/Ref no.: RiT/1-3</p>
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It has not been possible to visit the V & A to view these documents but study of his diaries in the 1820's might prove a fruitful area for future research.

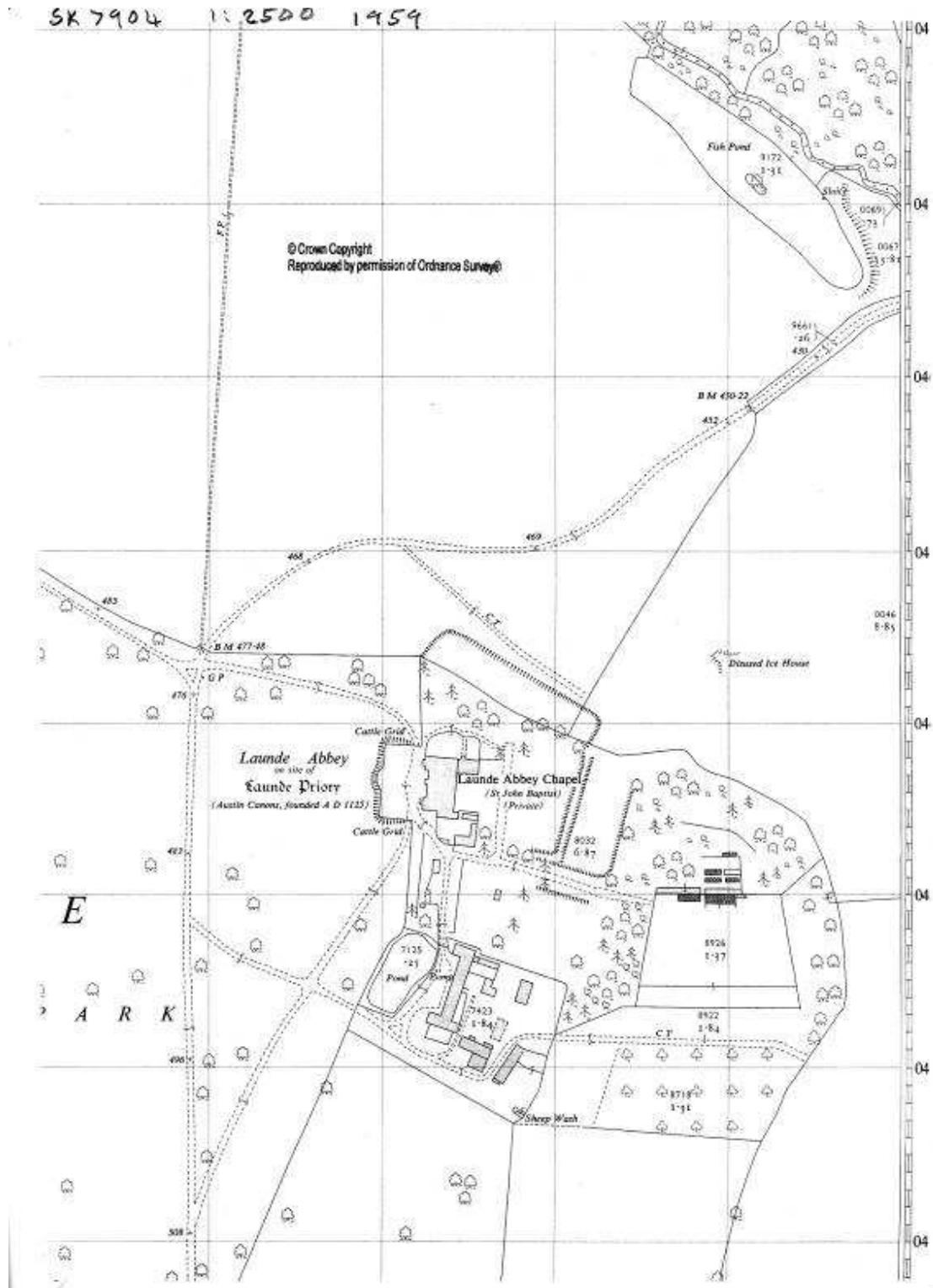
Appendix 4: Ordinance Survey Maps (1904 map)



1930 ORDINANCE SURVEY MAP



1959 ORDINANCE SURVEY MAP



Appendix 5: Information Contained In Dawson Archive At County Record Office

Leicestershire Record Office, Long Street, Wigston, Leicestershire

Launde Archives

(as listed in the beige card index)

1. DE 40/51/1 Particulars of Estate at Launde Abbey 1728
2. GD 52 Dawson Collection (see separate schedule below)
3. 3D 42/40/1-39 Deeds including land in Launde 1766-1866
4. 3D 42/89/192-7 Dawson & Simpson incl. deeds for property in Launde 1878 (nb. These need six separate request forms)
5. 3529/352 Deed 1663
6. 3529/356 Deed 1670
7. 98'30/8 Deed 1817
8. DE 2863 Photographs, newspaper cuttings when Abbey presented to Diocese of Leicester c. 1950 (stored with Coloerton Parish)
9. DE 3762/7-8 Sale particulars and plan. The Launde Estate 1954 (notes made)
10. DE 5099 Sale Catalogue (weekly collections) – couldn't find it in DE list!

GD 52 Dawson Collection Launde Abbey Estate

1. 1841 10 Feb granting the site of abbey of Launde 10 yd 6ltes
2. /1-11 1603 documents relating to the conveyance of the site of Launde abbey 7 the Manor of Loddington by Edward, Lord Cromwell to Sir William Smith.
3. 1658 marriage settlement Clement & Sarah Talbot
4. 1658 documents concerning 400 acres of estate
5. 1673 Lease for 500 years of house and site of Launde at a peppercorn rent

278 1886 4-8 Other surveys of various lande at Launde

Summary very early documents relating to the estate, leases, marriages etc.

Key details re the gardens from the Sale Catalogue 1954

Total area of estate 1,468 acres

1. '...attractive and easily maintained gardens...'
2. 'An Elizabethan type mansion, surrounded by fine pleasure grounds and plantations, situated in finely timbered park...'
3. 'Lawns; Flowers; Rose Beds; Walled Kitchens Garden'
4. Acreage:

Launde Abbey	.554 acres
Chapel & Gardens	5.900 acres
Stables and Spinneys	1.261 acres
Cottages etc	3.130 acres

Appendix 6: Notes of Interview with the Granddaughter of Harry Gould, gardener during the 1950's/60s

Who is in her early 60's, visited her grandparents at Launde frequently during her childhood. Her grandmother was the housekeeper and her grandfather, the sole gardener. He was originally the gamekeeper and lived at Loddington. He got the job as gardener during the period when the Coleman's owned Launde and during the early days of its ownership by the Church. He is buried in the crypt.

She says that her grandfather worked all the daylight hours in the garden and was passionate about it. He grew peaches and grapes in the greenhouse.

She comments that the main thing that she remembers were the flowers and that this is something that she misses when she visits Launde today. The central bed on the front terrace was a mass of colour, the stone urns were filled with flowers (bedding plants) as was the border in the sunken garden. She remembers a lot of roses and that the scent was very strong.

She can't remember the tennis court, so this, presumably, had gone by this time. The position was used for a marquee for garden parties.

Her grandfather grew all the vegetables for the house, and, as far as she can recall, the whole of the walled garden was cultivated. She thinks that the right-hand greenhouse might have been the grape house. There were also soft fruit.

She doesn't remember ever having gone into the area with the bothies though she says that the Oxford and Cambridge was a tool shed.

She doesn't remember any ponds alongside the chapel, by the road, and this would tie in with John Sills information that they were dug in the 1970's. She said that the stable pond had steps down to it and very large fish!

Sue Blaxland – February 2008

Appendix 7: Notes Of Interview With John Sills – Former Head Gardener At Launde Abbey - 1985-2003.

John stated that his recollections of the gardens at the Abbey date from 1947-48 (based on information gathered from other staff)

In the attic at Launde there should be a very large scale map/plan showing the layout of the house and the gardens immediately surrounding it. He described it as being like a 'surveyor's map'. The size is around 6/8ft x 5ft. Previously, it was on the wall above the cellar steps. There should also be aerial photographs in the attic. (On investigation, this turned out to be a large-scale OS map, which included the Launde Estate)

The Walled Garden and surrounding area: When he joined the staff at Launde, the walled garden was a 'donkey paddock' – i.e. just grassed. There was one small piece of kitchen garden. Sean, who worked with him, created the present layout in the 1990's. It was unclear whether this layout was based on a historic layout.

Outside the walled garden – on the south side, there were more beds. Damsons or plums were grown at the east end.

In the Dawson's day, there were 8 gardeners in total.

The plan shows detail of the area between the bothy and the fishing lakes. There were two cold frames by the central door. There were more bothies further up the wall but these were demolished as badgers got underneath them.

Beyond the frames, there was another glasshouse, which he believed had been a hot bed house. Next to it was a boiler house, which heated the walls of the garden (he described the walls as 'hypocaust' walls) and also the greenhouses. He says that Henry Evans (former Warden) had a hand-drawn plan of this area with another ice-house marked. As I understood him to say, they excavated this and found it was the site of the boiler

The Sunken Garden. There were steps on the side nearer to the house and he took these out in the early 1990's for ease of mowing. They were not aligned with the steps on the opposite side. There was no wall. There was no fountain in the sunken garden in his time, although, in the centre, where there currently are box edged beds, it was crazy paving with one of the existing urns positioned on it.

Circular bed near Chapel – in front of kitchen. This was formerly a rose bed. As I understood him to say, it had been turfed over but subsequently replaced with the current mixed planting.

The Tennis Court area. He confirmed that there were tennis courts the other side of the yew hedge. There was a changing room – this was situated on the line where there are current drainage manhole covers, level with the point where there is a gap in the hedge.

(This conflicts with the aerial photograph information) Sir Henry Tate¹, who rented Launde as a hunting box from 1932, told Henry Evans that the hedge was pyracantha in his day. John was unable to say what the original use was for the Oxford and Cambridge ‘pavilion’.

The Fishing Lakes: There is a map dated c 1948 with no fishing lakes shown. They were dug in the 1970’s by a local farmer, George Brough who farmed Abbey Farm. He doesn’t believe that they were earlier than this date. However, there was a lake in this position – it was L-shaped, running parallel with the chapel and at right-angles to it. See the illustration from Nichols.

Dates of trees: There was another copper beech, near to the existing one, which he felled, as a branch had fallen off it (the tree surgeon said it had only got about another 12 years of life). He counted the rings after he had felled it and dated it to about 1897-1900. He thinks the Wellingtonia is earlier – possibly planted around the time they were introduced into this country – 1853. According to our ‘1” for every year of growth” system, we thought they were about 150 years’ old.

The Park and the area at the Front: As we know, there was originally no ha-ha – just a fence and gates. He says that Leicester University did a survey in the 1980’s/90’s (Peter Liddle).

At one time, he saw a photograph of an excavation which had been done at the front of the house (possibly in the 1930’s/40’s). This showed that the level above the ha-ha had been built up and there was evidence of steps going down. He was a bit vague about this, but possibly these would have pre-dated the ha-ha and might have been the original steps. This would tie in with the theory of formal gardens at the front of the house.

The evergreen trees out in the park are Douglas Firs. They are adjacent to two reservoirs, now silted up. They used to feed the house with water. A wooden trough ran down the hill (now fenced off, as a cow fell in). This used to provide the house with water. On the wall of the house, near the ‘risen Christ’ statue was a float system to say how much water was in the well: when this dropped to a certain level, the sluice was opened to fill the well with water from the reservoir.

The planting at the front: this was originally cottage-garden style planting. The present box-edged beds and gravelled areas were done by his colleague, Sean.

There used to be an Orangery at the side, near to the ‘risen Christ’ statue. It had a brick base and extended out to the path near the Oxford and Cambridge. He didn’t know when this was demolished, or when the present outbuildings went in.

He thought that the entire area at the back of the house has been raised – he was a bit vague about this but I got the impression that it might have been a bit like “the area” in Georgian houses. There is apparently a window in the cellar.

¹ Lieutenant Colonel Sir Henry Tate, Master of the Cottesmore. There were 3 gardeners in his time – according to a quote from him in the Launde guidebook

John seemed delighted to talk to me and is happy if we want to contact him again with more questions.

Sue Blaxland – 22 February 2008