



## **RUFFORD REVEALED: The History of the Gardens from Cistercian Utility to Edwardian Opulence**

**STUDY DAY 15TH MAY 2007**

**ORGANISED BY THE LEICESTERSHIRE AND RUTLAND GARDENS TRUST**  
**At South Forest Conference Centre, Edwinstowe, Notts**  
**and Rufford Abbey Country Park, Ollerton, Nottinghamshire.**

We were welcomed by Stephen Barker, Chairman of the Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust, who described how the idea for the day originated. The study day was organized for us by Sue Blaxland from the L& R Gardens Trust, working closely with Rufford Abbey Country Park staff: Linda Hardy, Visitor Services Manager, Lucy Alcock, Country Parks Community Liaison Officer, and Paul Norton, Interpretation Officer. The Day was introduced by Nic Broomhead, Head of the Country Parks and Conservation for Nottinghamshire County Council

The study day fell naturally into 3 parts which summarized the 3 major periods of the long and fascinating history of Rufford. It had begun as a Cistercian Abbey in the 12th century, had been passed on to the Earl of Shrewsbury at the dissolution of the monasteries and had enjoyed a magnificent heyday during the Victorian and Edwardian periods when the house, the gardens and the estate were all extended and developed. Three lectures addressed these periods and, in the mid afternoon, several groups were given a guided walk around the grounds.

Rufford suffered from the depredations of troop training during the Second World War and the army huts were used by the Forestry Commission for trainees and staff. There was a campaign by Robert Innes-Smith to save and restore the Abbey, and later Nottinghamshire County Council bought and saved much of the estate in 1952. The Abbey has long gone, although there are enough of the house and abbey ruins to see what it must have been. Much has been restored since Rufford was designated a Country Park, which, with its Craft Centre, restored lake, arboretum, Orangery, Outdoor Living Store at the Mill, Ceramics Centre and Abbey ruin provides a lively place to visit. There is still much that could be done too, and at the end of our Study Day we were all excited and full of ideas on what should come next...

**THE CISTERCIAN PERIOD by Glyn Coppack, Senior Inspector, Ancient Monuments with English Heritage and a recognised authority on monasticism in Britain.**

**Summary by Jackie Alcott, Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust.**

There is some evidence of Roman occupation at Rufford and possibly a Roman road from Oxton to Blythe. At the time of the Norman Conquest the land fell into the area of Danelaw and was owned by Ulf, the Saxon. William 1 granted the land to his nephew Gilbert de Gant. Rufford, meaning "rough land by the ford" was listed in the Domesday Book and valued at 60 shillings. Ten villages and their

villagers lived there. By 1146 the land belonged to Gilbert, Earl of Lincoln, who, to ease his conscience regarding his past sins, gave the land to the Cistercian Order. The Cistercians were the reformers of the Benedictines and worked in the fields, which meant they took to gardening fairly easily. Monks from Rievaulx Abbey in Yorkshire were sent to Rufford, as a daughter house, led by Gamellus, the first of their seventeen Abbots. They began building in accordance with the rules of their order. Rufford received its official blessing from Pope Adrian IV in 1156.

The gardens have left very little clear evidence of what was created by the monks, but it is known, from other sources such as Rievaulx and Abbeys in France, that although they grew food and planted trees and fruit trees, ornamental planting was not part of their agenda. There would be a herb garden, as all Abbeys had Infirmarys and cared for the sick. A vegetable garden was often found near the cemetery. There would be stew ponds for the fish they ate. The Abbot had a garden for himself, for his own enjoyment, but there is no physical evidence to help us find this. The cloister was an important part of the daily activities and included several trees, usually with a central tree which provided a focus point. There was an orchard and a little orchard.



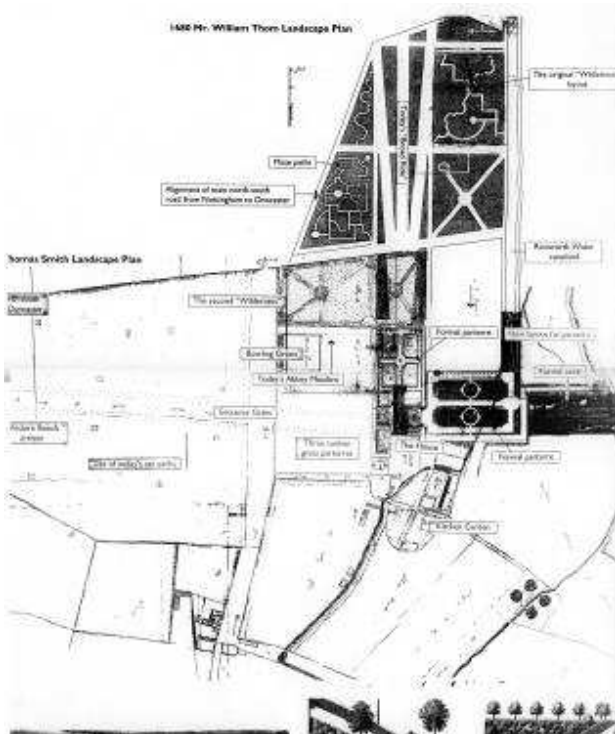
*Remains of a corner of the cloister  
at Rievaulx Abbey*

The Black Death, which devastated the country from 1345 to 1450, put an end to the prosperity of Rufford and the Abbey went into decline. By 1536 when Henry VIII took over the monasteries the annual income was only £100. The Abbey was closed and the land granted to George Talbot, 4th Earl of Shrewsbury.

**THE FORMAL AND LANDSCAPE PERIOD Pete Smith of English Heritage. Having been an Inspector of Historic Buildings in the Listing Branch, he is now a Senior Architectural Investigator. He has written many articles on country house design.**

**Summary by Irene M Jones, Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust.**

Geoffrey Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury bought Rufford Abbey for £236 15 6d, probably as a hunting lodge. An inveterate builder, he converted it into a house about 1560, enclosing the park for his deer. Much of the archives remain to be researched but Pete Smith had examined several including John Bunting's Survey Plan of 1637. James 1 and his son Charles came hunting here. The stable block was added and by 1616 the house covered an area as large as the ruined abbey. A descendant of Mary Talbot married George Savile of Yorkshire. After their main home, Thornhill Hall in Yorkshire, was blown up in the Civil War, the Savile family moved permanently to Rufford. The 4th baronet in 1680



***Mr. Thom's landscape plans – also showing triple Broad Ride.***

was made Earl of Halifax and a vast building and garden development began. The house doubled in size, as shown in a picture in “The Great Houses of Nottinghamshire” by Leonard Jacks. William Thom’s designs for the north garden were done about 1680 and further expansion took place 1720-40. There are no records of William Thom the gardener and designer, and Pete Smith is keen to hear more of him. The 7th Sir George Savile altered the gardens as can be seen on a 1725 survey plan. Thus the garden acquired a parterre, fine yews, and gravelled paths were laid at the north end of the Abbey. The gardens were designed to be seen from the main rooms on the first floor. The Wilderness Garden in the 18th century was a common feature, but revolutionary in the 1680’s. It is possible that Mr Thom may have known of Versailles and was influenced by it in his design.<sup>1</sup> Similarly the Long Canal became fashionable later in the century. The East Canal, a shorter canal and cascade were also part of these impressive plans. These and the long lawns have all been swept away by alterations.

The Broad Walk or Ride, popular in the late 17th century was lined with trees. Its triple form is probably unique. The only evidence of the outer rides was found in the Thoresby Estate map of 1738. These, which are no longer in existence, could be re-established quite inexpensively.

Alterations continued; there were two simple wildernesses to the north which would obscure the view of the Broad Walk. A bowling green, lime tree avenue, oval kitchen gardens and two small canals were envisaged. The horizons were expanding, as revealed in a letter in 1725 about the gardens. In 1728 John Hallam designed and built the Bath House with its two towers. It had a loggia with Doric columns and a canal. Three canals, two heart-shaped with little islands and a serpentine canal were part of the scheme but there is no evidence that they were ever constructed.

The 8th Baronet bought more land and properties to increase the size of Rufford. The lake and Corn Mill were created, so duck shooting and boating were pleasurable pastimes! He was succeeded by his nephew in 1783, an inveterate tree planter, and the trees that he placed in the Broad Walk are there today.

<sup>1</sup> Pete Smith has subsequently found evidence of correspondence between Sir George Savile and his brother Henry, who was Envoy Extraordinary to Louis XIV. So it was quite possible that Henry might have sent information to his brother about the latest garden design fashions at Versailles.

## **VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN PERIODS by Philip Jones, local historian and Council Member of the Thoroton Society of Nottinghamshire.**

### **Summary by Rowan Roenisch. Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust.**

*The first page of this section of the conference paper was not, in fact, part of Philip Jones' talk. It was compiled by Rowan to provide a link between this and the previous paper. The source materials were the Garden Timeline compiled by Paul Norton and the Rufford guidebook.*

### **Early Nineteenth Century**

In 1815 the abbey house was already paying window tax on 265 windows.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless between 1830 and 1837 the 8<sup>th</sup> Earl of Scarborough, called John Lumley-Savile, extended the house and the gardens. By 1837-40 he was employing the great Victorian architect Anthony Salvin to build a new Tudor style entrance porch with steps to the west; a clock and bell cupola on the south front; and also a large bay with grand staircase on the east front (now gone). The interior was extensively redecorated in Jacobean style. The famous London firm of Frederick Crace & Sons did expensive gilding, carving and paper-hanging. The house now had: 111 rooms, 14 bathrooms and over 20 staircases.<sup>3</sup> Also added adjacent to the house and stables were a coach-house, brew-house and water tower to supply water to the gardens (this latter is not now part of the Rufford Gardens but part of a housing estate built on the main Victorian Kitchen gardens).

In 1841 a straight lime tree avenue was created up to the west front of the house replacing an earlier curving drive. The new avenue ran from the Nottingham Road where new ornate wrought iron gates with classical gateposts and family crest were erected. (Unfortunately, although this drive and the gates survive, they are no longer in use).

### **Late Nineteenth Century**

From 1856 the house and grounds came into the hands of Captain Henry Savile, an illegitimate son of the 8<sup>th</sup> Earl.

In 1887 Sir John Savile inherited the estate. A career diplomat he became British ambassador to Rome and in 1888 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Savile. A highly cultured man he converted the bath house into a glass-roofed Orangery to house exotic plants and his collection of antiquities and sculptures. A boiler house provided it with under-floor heating. (The Orangery fell into disrepair after the First World War and today has no roof). Outside at the south east end of the Orangery, where there was a semi circular pool, he introduced a stone fountain based on the design of a huge Roman lamp excavated from the Temple of Diana at Nemi in Italy. (Despite efforts to refill the pool in recent years it is no longer watertight). The house was now lit by electricity. The head gardener, John Doe, grew Beauty of Stoke apples on dwarf pyramid trees. He was a champion grape grower growing varieties such as Black Hambro, Muscat of Alexandria and Gros Colman.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron inherited in 1896. He was an enthusiastic huntsman and regularly hosted hunts and between 1903 and 1909, usually in September, visits by King Edward VII who stayed at Rufford with a large entourage. We saw a photograph in the coach house showing one Royal weekend visit in 1904. It

---

<sup>2</sup> [Rufford - a garden timeline](#), Paul Norton, NCC, 2007, page 18

<sup>3</sup> [Rufford - a garden timeline](#), Paul Norton, NCC, 2007, page 19

was during this period that the vast kitchen gardens consisting of some 1.6 hectares including a vast walled area, four ranges of greenhouses, mushroom houses, vineries, several heated cucumber pits, a lean-to propagating house, bothy, fruit store house, potting shed and kiln house came into their own



*A Royal Weekend Visit in 1904.*

supplying vast quantities of fruit, vegetables and flowers of every kind and many varieties throughout the year for the house and even flowers for the station when the King arrived! There were large numbers of gardeners including an army to sweep the drive and clean the tools. The king loved the gardens and gave presents of a variegated sycamore, a mulberry and a holm oak plus a gift to the head gardener. In the yard there is a bronze sundial built in memory of King Edward.

However, the lime avenue was described by this time as having suffered in severe gales. The park is described as finely wooded; there are yews and holly cut into fantastic shapes around the house. Below a Winter Garden (the Orangery) filled with immense palms rose a fountain which flowed into the ancient stew or fishpond bordered with daffodils.

In 1910 an article in *The Gardener's Magazine* remarks on both the extent and the beauty of the finely wooded and picturesque park. It describes the Kitchen Garden and several themed areas. The article listed the huge numbers of each species of roses, carnations, trees, shrubs, flowers, and fruit including bunches of Madresfield Court grapes weighing on average 6 lbs a bunch. Described were a Japanese garden on the site of an old orchard with paved walks, a small pond, stone lanterns, a waterfall and a thatched tea house (Japanese gardens had become fashionable from the 1890s e.g. at Clivedon and Newstead Abbey); a Roman garden surrounded by fruit trees (this was bulldozed down in 1981); and a Rose Garden bounded by a yew hedge which included roses such as Madame Caroline Testout, Liberty, Killarney, and Prince de Bulgarie. This also had a



*The Japanese Garden*

rustic pergola around the perimeter supporting Dorothy Perkins, Lady Gay and Crimson Rambler roses. A border of blue flowers was also mentioned. It was planted with clematis, Michelmas daisies, dahlias, heliotropes, and violas.

One of the flower gardens created in the Edwardian period but no longer in existence had a large circular lily pond with broad walks radiating out from it and different shaped beds with hardy flowers. Along the western edge of the lake was a paved walk with dry stone wall to one side with aubretias and catmint at the base. There were seats set into the wall at intervals. Hydrangeas in half barrels were one of the specialities of the Rufford gardens in this period – a display of which can be seen in the stable block today. To the north were formal lawns and hardy herbaceous borders with clipped yews.

There was ivy up the walls of the house and some specimen clipped yews and holly. On the entrance front of the house were hollyhocks besides the steps. Along the garden front grew six varieties of pelargoniums and half barrels with hydrangeas.

Today the Kitchen Garden, Rose Garden and Japanese Garden to the south no longer exist – the land is no longer in the ownership of the council and has been given over to a modern housing estate. Still surviving but now part of the housing estate are the Water Tower, Brew House and Gardener's Cottage. Rufford Abbey Country Park's new formal gardens are within yew hedges and include a herb and a rose garden which have been re-established since the 1970s. These are located to the south east of the bath house/Orangery. Further new features are planned.



*The Rose Garden*

*Rowan concluded that this is but a small record of what may be far more intriguing information about the Rufford gardens in innumerable boxes of archive material owned by the Saviles. She felt that it was a pity that there has not been a proper plant or tree survey of the site and that no-one has attempted to re-open the rides and their vistas – bats or no bats!*

## GUIDED WALK

by Eva Penn-Smith. Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust.



It is only by visiting the garden at Rufford with a knowledgeable guide that one fully appreciates the extent of the grounds in their heyday under the Saviles.

We assembled in the stable block, where our large group was divided between three guides, then out, going left through the rose garden, past the imposing front of the house with its main entrance flanked by attractive twisty barley sugar pillars. This used to be reached by a long lime tree avenue from the original main gate, although the entrance has now been moved further south.

*The main entrance of the house*

We walked along the former terrace which became the Queen Mother's Walk on the occasion of her 80th birthday. Both sides are bordered by immaculate pleached plane trees and on the right is an extensive sunken lawn. Those members of our group who had visited Rufford some years before were very struck by the great improvement in maintenance under the care of Nottinghamshire County Council. Dotted around the lawn are several immense cedars, the first of many magnificent trees we were to see at Rufford. Walking round three sides of the large lawn we passed an old cedar which we were told was planted by James I. The tree had its crown lopped in memory of the executed King Charles I. On the far side of the lawn there is a fine view of the picturesque ruins of the old abbey. I loved the beautiful weeping ashes and close to the ruins there are a superb variegated maple and a cut-leaved beech. We then visited the building that was originally the Bath House and dates from 1729. It was later converted to an Orangery with the addition of a glass roof and under-floor heating. It is a very attractive brick building topped by a stone balustrade and flanked by a square tower. It is now the Apsidal Gallery, housing a large modern outdoor sculpture, although I would have preferred the original orange trees! It overlooks a circular pond at one end with an old fountain and a garden containing tree ferns. We walked along by the wall to the original kitchen garden, which appears to have been huge but was sold into private hands. In the formal gardens we were all charmed by the life size stone "Man and Ewe" on a park bench gazing towards the house.



*The Apsidal Gallery*

As we returned to the house for a welcome visit to the Savile Restaurant and a delicious cream tea, I noticed a delightful corner of the garden where an enterprising wisteria had left the wall and was roaming off over various bushes, obviously on a take-over bid. In this area there was a very unusual horse chestnut with red leaves and deep red flowers which I believe is an Indian horse chestnut, *Aesculus indica*, and there was also a mulberry vine with divided leaves which is probably a form of the black mulberry, *Morus nigra*.

Some of us later walked round the lake and were fascinated by some of the old ice houses. They used to cut the ice off the lake and store it in this building, which had a very deep floor. I believe there were four ice houses, constructed in the late 1800's. At the end of the lake is Rufford Mill, powered by the lake and during World War I was used for making coffins -now, more happily, it is a Lakeside Garden Shop and Outdoor Living Store.



Rufford is a fine example of "how the mighty have fallen" when one sees the details of the original acreage and the farms and other buildings once owned. It is indeed a great credit to Nottinghamshire County Council who bought it and care for it for us to enjoy.

