

**LEICESTERSHIRE  
AND RUTLAND  
GARDENS  
TRUST**



**REPORT ON THE HISTORY OF  
THE GARDENS AT  
STAUNTON HAROLD**



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## **INTRODUCTION**

For some years, the Leicestershire and Rutland Gardens Trust has been involved in a national project to research and record the history of our parks and gardens with a view to entering this information into a national database:

<http://www.parksandgardens.ac.uk/>

This research into the history of the gardens at Staunton Harold forms part of this project. However, it was felt that it would also be desirable to publish our findings in the form of a written report, which it would be possible to download from our own website:

[www.lrgt.org](http://www.lrgt.org)

We should like to thank Dr. Irene Brightmer, a member of both Derbyshire Historic Gardens Trust and our own Trust, for her input into this research. Her in-depth knowledge of the history of the Estate and her generosity in sharing this information with us has been invaluable.

Sue Blaxland and Sheila Burnage  
2009

## ***DESCRIPTION OF THE HALL AND THE GARDENS***

Staunton Harold Hall is situated 5 km. north-east of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, just off the B587, Ashby to Melbourne Road.

Staunton Harold Hall and Church are surrounded by a rolling landscape, which is the result of a number of phases of development spanning six centuries. Pevsner described its position as "unsurpassed in the country - certainly as far as Englishness is concerned"



The site dates from the 11th or 12th century. The estate, which is now in divided ownership, contains two lakes, formed from canals which existed in the 17th-century formal gardens. The former walled garden contains a plant nursery and garden centre. The former stables now houses The Ferrers Centre for Arts and Crafts.

The Hall and its immediate environs are in private ownership and are not accessible to the public. The Hall is available occasionally for functions and private visits. The surrounding park and former stables (Ferrers Centre) are open to the public. The Church in front of the Hall is owned by the National Trust, as are the Golden Gates. Access to the church is by paths marked on plans posted in the grounds. Church opening times vary and can be found by reference to the National Trust Calke Abbey. The former walled garden contains a garden centre, also open to the public.

## ***TIMELINE***

- 1086      Domesday Book records William the Conqueror granting lands at Staunton to Henry de Ferraris, who subsequently leased it to a Saxon underling, Harold de Lecha.
- 1324      William de Staunton built the first Manor House at Staunton Harold. A record exists of a park and village but the exact site is unclear.
- 1623      The Great Park (which was between Staunton Harold and Breedon) was disparked and turned into farms.
- 1646      Sir Robert Shirley 4<sup>th</sup> Bt. succeeded to the Estate and, in 1653, built the chapel next to the hall.
- 1700 -      The north front of the house was rebuilt and extensive formal gardens  
1702      created.
- 1762 -      The landscape was remodelled into a natural style and the Hall was  
1778      redesigned
- 1827-      Major alterations were made to the landscape around the house with the  
1829      introduction of a sunken ditch, lawn levelling, the construction of a conservatory and pleasure grounds and new access routes.
- 1940-      The house was requisitioned by the Army and was damaged during the  
1945      War by its use as a prisoner of war camp.
- 1949      Some of the contents of the mansion were auctioned.
- 1954      The whole estate was broken up. The Church and gates were acquired by the National Trust. The nurseries (formerly the Walled Garden) were purchased by a Mr. Watson
- 1955-      The House was bought by Leonard Cheshire, together with the  
2001      immediate surroundings and developed as a Cheshire Home. In 1985, it was sold to the Ryder-Cheshire Mission and remained as a palliative care home until 2002, when it moved into private ownership

## ***DETAILED HISTORY***

Staunton appears in the Domesday book as one of 210 'lordships' granted to Henry de Ferraris by William of Normandy, after the Conquest. It was then 'enfeoffed' (leased) to a feudal Saxon underling, Harold de Lecha. It became known as Staunton Harold to distinguish it from other Stauntons (stony towns) throughout the country.

There was a deer park at Staunton by 1324 and later, two - the Little Park and the Great Park. The Little Park is believed (Chris Burnett Assocs. 1995) to have occupied the present parkland area and therefore is of particular importance at Staunton Harold as a continuous feature of the landscape from that date.

In 1423, Ralph Shirley, one of Henry V's leading commanders at Agincourt, married Margaret, Heiress of John de Staunton. The Staunton estate was then in the ownership of the Shirley family until 1954.

There is no documentary evidence to suggest any designed landscape at Staunton Harold before the mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century, although there would have been gardens, orchards and farms to support the community associated with the house.

In 1611, George Shirley was created 1<sup>st</sup> Baronet Ferrers by James I. This was a hereditary title.

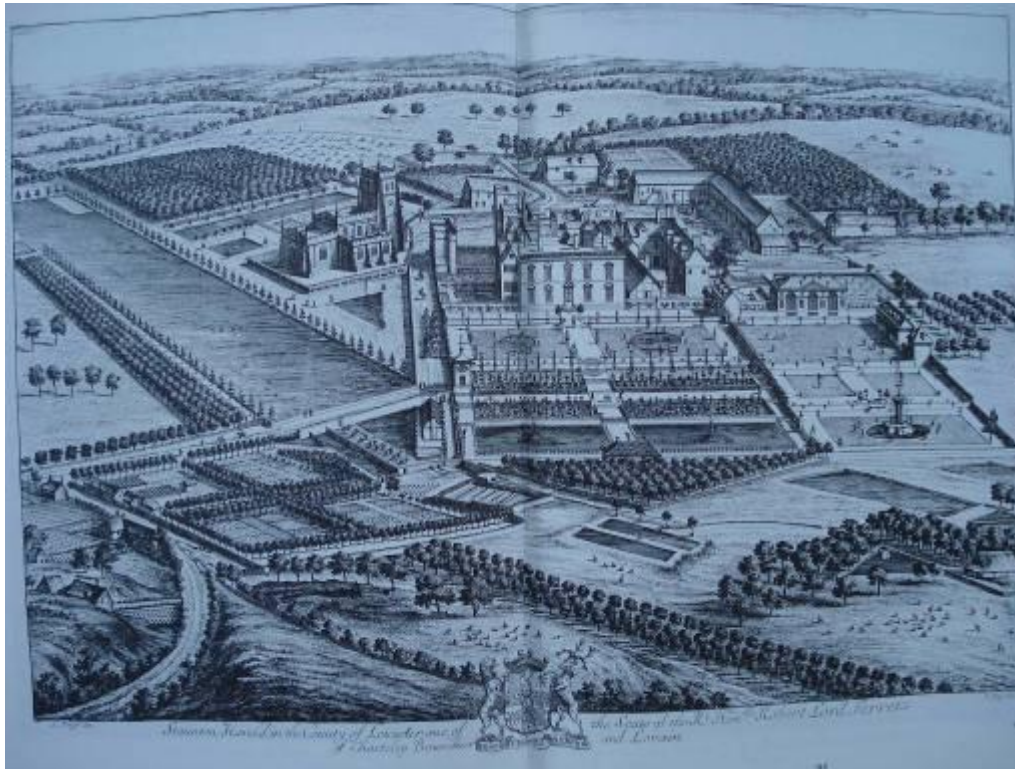
In 1623, the Great Park was disparked and turned into farms.

In 1653, Sir Robert Shirley, the 4<sup>th</sup> Baronet, built a church next to the Hall. It is a particularly significant building as it is the only church built in England during the period of the Commonwealth. See the English Heritage Register entry below for more information on this.

Shirley's son, who was created Baron Ferrers in 1677, and Earl Ferrers in 1711 set about 'aggrandising the hotch potch of Jacobean and earlier buildings which he had inherited' ("Back from the Brink" – John Blunt). He added a new north-east front to the Hall and laid out extensive formal gardens around it. The location of the Church would have dictated the position of these gardens, which might otherwise have been positioned to the south of the house.

A contemporary described Shirley as 'a great improver of gardening and parking' (Country Life 1913, 526). There is no record of who was responsible for their design although Country Life 1913 states that "it is probable that George London who had laid out the neighbouring gardens at Melbourne may have advised him. London certainly knew the garden and writes in 1701 to Thomas Coke of Melbourne of two visitors setting out to see gardens and plantations proposing to see "My Lord Chesterfield's, Lord Ferrers' and the Duke of Devonshire's"

The Hall and gardens were illustrated by Leonard Knyff (c.1702) and engraved by (1706) – see overleaf.



The report by Chris Burnett's Associates (1995) describes them from the engraving thus: "The main garden, terraces ranged either side of a broad axial path and with a canal across the bottom, lay north-east of the Hall. A summerhouse at the east end of the main cross axis adjoined the west end of a predecessor of the present causeway bridge, to the south of which, past the chapel, extended the rectangular Church Pool. West of the southern part of the Pool was a roughly square block of woodland, possibly a wilderness, although that name is not associated with the area until the Ordnance Survey map of 1882. Further pools lay along the valley bottom north of the Hall gardens."

Nichols quotes a Mr Wooley's description of the garden in 1712 from his MS History of Derbyshire as follows:

"It has a handsome new front towards the gardens... the gardens are well-watered with fountains and canals, very good aviaries, a decoy, and stations for a great many exotic fowls. The park and woods about it are large and reach within half a mile of Caulk (sic) and a mile of Melbourne but being seated in a clay soil, it is somewhat dirty coming to it....the east end of the church abuts on a very large canal, the biggest in all the county. The gardens lie on the north west side of the house, consisting of several parterres in easy descents from the house, which add a gracefulness to the one and the other." (They are in fact on the north-east side of the house.)

The height of one of the fountains was enhanced by the water being thrown from and then spilled down over a prominent stone column, not unlike the giulio in the Octagon Lake at Stow. ("Sir John Vanburgh and Landscape Architecture in Baroque England 1690-1730") This can be seen on the Kip engraving



According to Nichols, MacKay in his tour through England early in the reign of George I, calls Staunton Harold “a noble seat... and the gardens adorned with statues”

For the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were few changes. The English Heritage entry below describes this period: the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Earls died as minors and the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl, Laurence Shirley, lived a violent and dissolute life. In 1760, he was hanged for the murder of the steward, who had been appointed by the Countess’s family to protect her interests.

He was succeeded by his brother, Washington Shirley, who had been an Admiral in the Navy. He was a patron of the arts and an amateur architect. It was he who swept away the buildings and terraces which can be seen in the Kyp engraving and created the house and gardens much as we see them today. Work on the house started in 1761, adding the eleven-bay Palladian south-east front and the projecting wings to the south-west Lion Court. The stables, now the Ferrers Centre, were built some twenty years later.

A painting of Staunton Harold attributed to Thomas Smith (d. 1767) shows the landscape much as now.



The park comprises a one kilometer long section of a valley, whose bottom is largely occupied by two sheets of water.

In 1804, Nichols describes it as follows:

“A fine sheet of water, or lake of considerable extent, adorned with swans, runs through the great part of it; at the upper end of which is a pond of seven acres, constituting a fine piece of water called “The Church Pool” over the lower end of which and next the lake is built a handsome bridge, corresponding with the house. The lake covers a space of between 20 and 30 acres and is 18 or 20 feet deep about

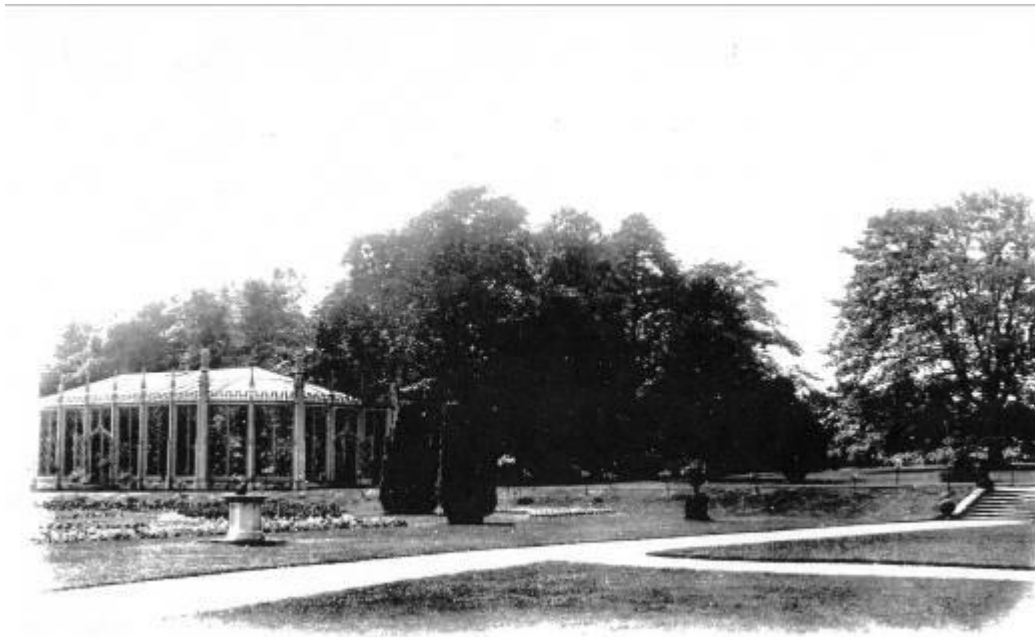


the widest part; it is half a mile long, about a quarter of a mile wide and the head of it is a remarkable height...”

*(See Page 12 for illustrated Plates from Nichols)*

The late 1820's saw the introduction of a Pleasure Ground south and east of the house. A lawn was laid and specimen trees were planted around its edges. A yew-edged path crossed a ditch to a low-lying area of woodland and shrubs. This runs north, before turning along the outside of the south-east wall of the kitchen gardens.

This was, in effect, a second development of formal gardens. At the same time, other alterations were made to the estate including new drives and the expansion of the walled gardens. An extensive and splendid conservatory was erected at this time.



The 10<sup>th</sup> Earl, who inherited in 1859, built or rebuilt many of the properties on the estate but the revenue from the estates was not sufficient to maintain them and he left his successors heavily in debt.

In the 1890's a private golf course was introduced to the northern part of the park.

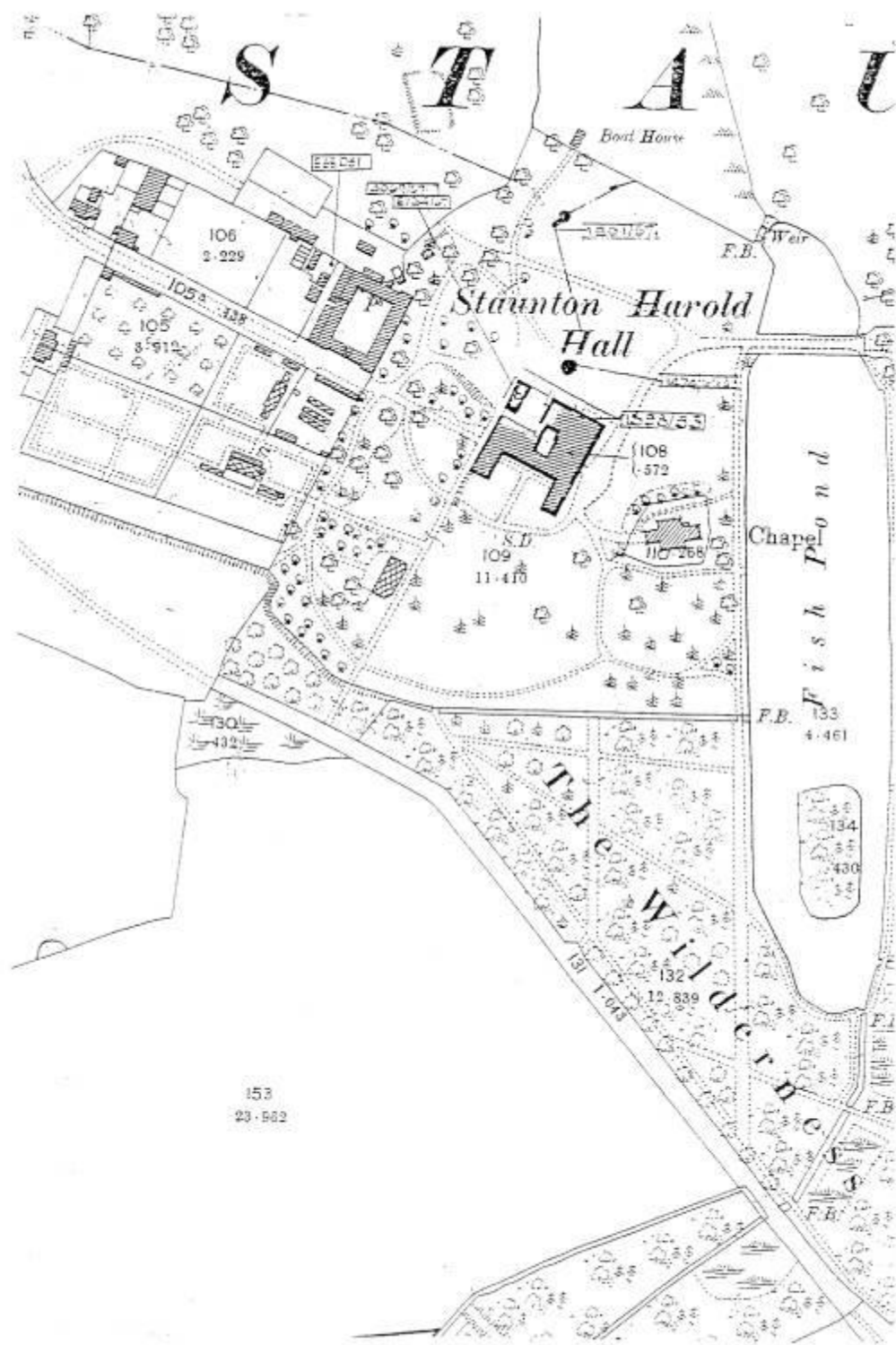


Fig 9. Extract from the second edition Ordnance Survey Map. From the island in the lake.  
1901

The Hall was requisitioned by the army in 1940. It was occupied first by the army and then by Italian and finally Germany prisoners of war. After the War, some contents were sold in 1949,

Finally the 12<sup>th</sup> Earl, unwilling to saddle his son with the financial burden that he had born, put the estate up for sale. In 1954 the Hall and estate lands were sold to different owners and the church given to the National Trust. Major changes followed the break-up of the estate: the avenues approaching the Hall were felled in the late 1950's, as were beeches on the horizon line adjoining the park wall. By the 1960's the Wilderness had been felled and replaced by a poplar plantation. The Hall became a Cheshire Home in 1954, and in 1985 was sold to the Ryder-Cheshire Mission. It was a palliative Care Home until 2002.

During this time, in 1990, a formal garden with box hedges and brick-edged paths was constructed in the Lion Court, to the south-west of the Hall. This was designed by the Leicestershire County Council in consultation with the National Trust.

Since 2003, the Hall has been in private ownership.



*The History and Antiquities of Leicester – Vol 3 Pt II. Nichols Plate XCVII*



*The History and Antiquities of Leicester – Vol 3 Pt II. Nichols Plate XCVIII*



*The stable block – now the Ferrers Centre*



*Hall, Lake and Church*





*Greenhouse in the former walled garden, now a Garden Centre*



*The Gateway to Nowhere*



*The Golden Gates*



*The Conduit  
House*



## ***HISTORIC FEATURES OF THE HOUSE AND ITS GROUNDS***

### **The Hall:**

Grade I. LBS No. 187841

The Hall, largely rebuilt in 1763, incorporated an earlier Jacobean house. The exterior – brick with stone dressings - is built round a quadrangle. The east-facing, principal front is two storeys, having 11 bays and a pedimented centre piece with Tuscan and Ionic columns and a triglyph frieze. The south front has three storeys with projecting wings, forming the lion court.

### **Stable Block:**

LBS NO. 187843 Grade II

Stable block, late c18. A brick quadrangle. East range, 2 storeys, 9 bays with central pavilion continuing Palladian window in recessed arch to ground floor, and a triple-light sash window above. Many window spaces blind, but all have stone sills and fine-gauged heads. Stone string course & eaves cornice. The south front has a wide 3 bays between 2 pedimented & slightly projecting end bays, double coach doors with segmental arched heads to end bays and centre.

Built by the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl Ferrers, principally for stabling, it also contained coach houses, a granary, accommodation for unmarried staff, a dovecote and the blacksmith forge, which is still in use.

Now called The Ferrers Centre, it has been a craft centre since 1978.

### **Chapel**

LBS No. 187839 Grade I

Chapel of the Holy Trinity

Chapel, unique as a complete survival of a church built during the commonwealth.

Begun in 1653, the church and its furnishings were - not completed until 1665. In a gothic style, but a highly wrought and careful gothic, the parts, west tower, short nave of 3 bays with clerestory and aisles, and chancel, very sharply articulated. Tower has paired bell openings with Y-tracery, battlements and pinnacles with windvanes. Body of church has embattled parapets with crocketed pinnacles over buttresses. Flat-headed traceried lights to clerestory. Other windows in an early decorated style.

Elaborate baroque west doorway with paired tapering pilasters, swags, mannerist angels, and Shirley arms and inscription plate above. Interior has gothic-style architecture but fittings are all in Jacobean character. Original west door, ornate west screen with pierced central archway and side arches, pierced leaf scroll frieze above and panelled base.

Above this, the organ loft incorporating

Shirley arms in broken segmental pediment. Schmidt organ, case of 1686. Box pews, wall panelling and casing for piers. Plain panels to nave, more ornate in chancel. 2-decker pulpit, chancel screen, wrought iron, by Robert Bakewell, 1711, 4 hatchments over. Ceiling painted throughout, a curious depiction of clouds and elements - the creation out of chaos, signed by Samuel and Zachary Kink, and dated 1655. Communion table also original c1660-65.

**Entrance**

The Golden Gates LBS 187845 Grade II\*

Ornate gateway, late c17 baroque. Rusticated stone piers and barley sugar Ionic columns bearing entchlosures and segmental pediments. Flanked by late c18 pedestrian archways with round arches and rusticated with and entchlosures. The gateway formerly contained wrought iron gates, and heraldic crest & shields once capped the piers.

The gate piers were originally at the entrance to the bowling green in the formal gardens laid out by the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Ferrers. They were probably moved to their present position by the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl when he re-landscaped the area; the outer pedestrian archways probably date from this period. The hound and stag on the top of the piers are the supporter of the Shirley family coat of arms.

**Ornamental Bridge**

LBS 187845 Grade II\*

A shallow spanned bridge over the lake, brick, with stone copings to parapet. This is linked to the Golden Gates.

**The Conduit House**

LBS 187846 Grade II

Probably c17. Small single storey rubble structure of 1 room. One small window to rear with chamfered stone surround on front. Nail studded door. Slate roof. Lined pool for water within.

This small building protects a spring-fed stone tank. The spring was probably the water supply for the medieval village of Staunton Harold which occupied this site, but which disappeared centuries ago.

**Gateway**

Gateway to Garden also known as the Gateway to Nowhere

LBS 187844 Grade II\*

Gateway, moved from its original site. Dated 1681, in baroque manner. Lower stage has square-headed doorway in rusticated surround, with keystone, and rusticated Doric pilasters, consoles on rusticated flanking walls, and cornice over. Above this, a tall rectangular panel with foliate swags, eagles, and rusticated pilasters with coruncopia buttresses. Above the cornice, a shallow flat headed pediment bearing an urn.

This was originally within the elaborate 17<sup>th</sup> century gardens established by the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Ferrers. It was probably moved to its current location in the 1760's by the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl, during his remodeling of the Hall and Park.

**Chapel Yard Walling, gate piers and gates**

LBS187840 Grade II

Walling of mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, ashlar with coping and angle buttresses. Ashlar gate press with heraldic friezes, cornices and ball finials. Wrought iron gates with twisted shafts and ornate crestings 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Lake**

Church Pool and North Lake

These are the two main water features surviving on the estate today.

The Church Pool was created from the long canal seen in the Kip view (c.1706) as a

rectilinear sheet of water. Nichols refers to it as “the Church Pool” in 1804 but on the first edition OS map (1882) it is called Fish Pond. The date of the islands is unclear.

A second canal is shown on the Kip view together with further fish ponds. This group disappeared with the creation of the North Lake, as part of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century landscaping.

### **Lodge**

Melbourne Lodge

This was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at what was probably the oldest approach to Staunton Harold.

### **Conservatory**

This was built between 1829 -1831 as part of the general improvements to the “Pleasure Ground”. It was situated to the south of the house and was described as “as extensive and splendid conservatory” built “on the latest and most approved principle”.

It was a gothic structure with pinnacles and castellations.

It is no longer in existence and is believed to have been demolished following damage in a severe hail storm.

### **Kitchen Garden**

It is believed that the kitchen gardens were moved to their present position in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, as part of the landscaping scheme. Major improvements were made in the late 1820’s and 1830’s, probably in association with the construction of the pleasure grounds.

According to a survey of 1859, the size of the kitchen garden was 3 acres.

The sale particulars of 1954 supply details: size about three acres, enclosed by a high brick wall and divided into four main areas. There were small additional areas of garden outside the wall on the south and west. Glasshouses included tomato houses, cucumber, carnation house and two heated fern pits. There was also a boiler house, a tool shed, mushroom house, two potting sheds, a flower room and office and store shed.

The small remaining range of glasshouses and the peach house (now a café) were manufactured by Foster and Pearson of Nottingham.

The kitchen garden is now a commercial garden centre.

### **Icehouse**

This is probably 18<sup>th</sup> century and is located on private land near to the Ferrers Centre. It is brick-lined.

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