

The Great Fulford Landscape: a preliminary view

Shirley Tamblyn



Great Fulford House, south front from across the lake, December 2005

Great Fulford House is ten miles east of Exeter and two miles S.E. of Dunsford. "The Fulfords have possessed this estate since the reign of Richard I ..." ¹ They are the only family left in Devon who can claim an uninterrupted descent in the male line since that date. The present possessor, Francis Fulford, lives here with his family.

The 'manor of Dunsford' was purchased at the time of the Reformation by Sir John Fulford, it having previously been held by the abbey of Canonsleigh. ² This continuity was, however, seriously endangered when in 1461, during the Wars of the Roses, Sir Baldwin Fulford a leading Lancastrian was apprehended attempting to escape by ship from Dartmouth to Brittany, having been betrayed. Baldwin was convicted for treason by the Yorkists and executed. The family suffered



Baldwin Fulford's Estate Map 1841. The demesne farm is coloured green. (By permission of Francis Fulford)

confiscation of their home and lands by an Act of Attainder, and John Staplehill was rewarded with the Fulford Estate by Edward IV. By 1462 he had obtained a license to empark a deer park. ³ . An initial attempt to recover the estate by Sir Baldwin's son, Thomas, in 1465 was unsuccessful; but he received his father's estates back in their entirety in 1467 when the Act of Attainder was fully reversed. During the English Civil War and ensuing Interregnum (1642-1660) the mansion suffered badly at the hands of both opposing sides that variously sacked it or used it as a garrison. Colonel Francis Fulford (1583-1664), a Royalist supporter, was heavily fined and retired to his wife's estate in Dorset for the duration. ⁴ As was commonplace during this period the gardens would have been at least neglected, and at worst abused and dismantled.

The estate is on the north-eastern edge of Dartmoor, a former royal forest, where the land is sheltered by the moor from the cold, wet south-westerly winds that the moor endures. The River Teign runs west to east, south of the estate. The land is well served with streams, one of which was dammed in the second half of the eighteenth century and now forms an irregular lake across the south prospect of the mansion. Since the land is often quite wet it is more suited to cattle pasture than arable. ⁷ No farmhouses or buildings are visible from the mansion today perhaps partly due to the topography but also due to the maintenance of woodland cover. ⁶ There are numerous natural vistas created by virtue of the undulating landscape and on higher ground the remains of two redoubts, constructed in 1645 by besieging Parliamentary forces, are now mutilated and obscured by trees.

The Estate Map indicates in green all of those lands owned and leased in 1841, whilst the Ordnance Survey extract for 1906 illustrates how few changes have occurred in the intervening period. The estate is divided into a number of tenanted farms. Nineteenth-century family records confirm that the practice of 'leases for three lives' was followed. ⁷ These were probably for nominal rents and the values of the land at about 18 years purchase; and subsequently substituted by 'leases for years' and improvements in agriculture. ⁸ The 1821 census detail records that all of the families living on the estate were primarily involved with agriculture. The men were exclusively farmers or labourers. The Fulford family were, from time to time, involved in land exchanges an example of which occurred in 1814 between Baldwin Fulford (1775-1847) and William Strong when the former received land at Higher and Lower Combe and Blackpitts near Tedburn St. Mary village in exchange for three parcels of land around Drewsteignton village ⁹ (reducing lands owned in the west and increasing in the north).



OS map 1906 2nd. Edition sheet LXXVIII showing part of the estate.

The Mansion House

Hidden away, close to the head of acombe at an altitude of about 150m, this courtyard mansion is large and square, built around a quadrangle. It was originally completed in about 1534,¹⁰ of stucco (south and east ranges and walls inside quadrangle) over stone and 'larger than most in Devon. Characteristic of the county in its reticent exterior it has a patchy and undocumented history of rebuilding and remodelling from the middle ages to the nineteenth century'.¹¹ Together with the gardens and wider estate, it has gone through periods of decay and ascendancy dependent on means available for maintenance, restoration and updating. London fashions filtered through only slowly to Devon and even then were modified to suit the purse, and whimsy, of the landowning gentry.

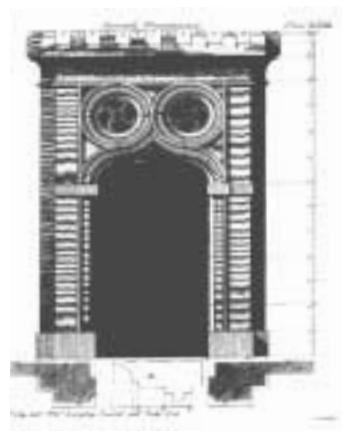
John Fulford (1736-1780) found his finances ruined by his improvements to the house and the estate. He tried, and failed, to remedy serious structural faults in the mansion and the Great Dining Room and the Great Staircase ceilings both collapsed circa 1805-1810, but made enduring improvements to the estate. A convert to the fashionable 'landscape movement' pioneered by Capability Brown earlier in the century, John created the lake, formed bridges, re-routed drives, and planted 'belts' of trees along the new parkland boundaries and groves and clumps of Scotch firs. Henry Frothermill, vicar of Cheriton Bishop wrote to his brother, in December 1769:

*We have lately lost our nearest neighbour, Mr Fulford who was the only gentleman besides the clergy who was near us. Poor man! He came young to his estate and imprudently lived above it! The consequence is that he is now, though not much above thirty, obliged to leave his ancient family seat, which is one of the best, if not the very best in the county and go to France, where he proposes to live at less expense than he did at his own seat.*¹²

John's nephew, Baldwin Fulford (1775-1847), attempted to rescue the mansion. He relocated the principal rooms to the sunny, south range where he 'threw out bays and rearranged rooms' so he could enjoy the outlook across the lake and parkland.¹³ The Estate's farmhouses were also all rebuilt in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century. No named designers have been formally linked with any of the buildings or external works, although architect James Wyatt (1747-1813) is thought to have been involved in the 1805 remodelling of the mansion.¹⁴ Batty Langley's *Gothic Architecture Improved* of 1747 was clearly consulted for the main entrance into the east range.¹⁵



Tudor archway, main entrance, east range modelled on a Batty Langley pattern of 1747



In 1914, it was reported that during droughts the outline of a foundation line of an outer court with farmery and stables could be seen, which were thought to have been defensive.¹⁶

A Service courtyard lies at the rear of the wing on the west side of the quadrangle. On its south side, 'The gateway in the back quadrangle is the oldest part of the house', and this contains kitchens, and 'houses of office' including brewhouse and bakehouse.¹⁷

The Deer Park

The Deer Park, an essential asset of prestige, for sport and for filling the larder, was situated at a little distance from the house. The oldest boundaries may simply have been ditches, earth banks (planted with quickset hedging and ditches or paling, or a mixture of both) being introduced later. Not until the 'landscape movement' of the eighteenth century were the boundaries of parkland rearranged, as necessary, to ensure that the associated mansion was in a dominant central position with commanding and picturesque views to the 'improved' landscape beyond the ha-ha. At Great Fulford boundary walls and large gates clearly define the boundary of the 'old park'. White, in 1850, describes 'a finely wooded park of about 400 acres, stocked with deer, and having a small lake'.¹⁸ Formerly, the Deer Park, which may have been much larger, was enclosed by park pale, two banks with a narrow gap between, and a ditch inside the inner bank.¹⁹ Mr. Fulford has identified a deer lincage on the margins of fields 1455 and 233 of the 1887 OS map. In about 1860 the Deer Park was disparked and divided into farms.²⁰

Hoskins states that: 'In 1873 they still held the average Devon squire's estate of just under 3,000 acres'.²¹ This intelligence, sourced from Bateman's *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland* (1883), is questioned by Francis Fulford, who believes that his ancestor may have prevaricated concerning declaration of the true acreage. Extrapolating backwards from the current acreage of 3,000 he estimates there would have been 4,000 acres in 1873.

The Walled Gardens

There are several walled gardens on terraces where the land rises to the north and west of the house, with walls constructed in cob topped with slate tiles. Repairs have been made using stone, rubble and brick. These gardens may have been set out on terraces in enclosures at the time the mansion was built. Typically, they were not laid out symmetrically and were offset from the house. Despite the fashion in the eighteenth century for demolishing walled enclosures in the vicinity of country houses, these still remain. '[The provincial gentry] were almost by definition, slow to follow elite fashion: not so much because they were ignorant of them, or even because they lacked the necessary resources..., but rather because they had different lifestyles, and made different requirements on their immediate environment'.²² According to the landscape historian, Tom Williamson, most seventeenth century gentry were 'more interested in plants than philosophy, and it was probably the horticultural benefits of walled enclosures which were most valued'. In particular, collecting fruit trees was something of an obsession. High, south facing walls provided the ideal microclimate for ripening the fruit.²³ The walled gardens' escape from destruction probably also owes much to the fact that they are not visible from the main façade of the house.²⁴ The variable demise of Great Fulford's cob walls owes more to neglect and the passage of time than to any interference, but the original construction of the walls, which are to an extent stone but in a greater part are cob, is very sound hence the walls may be of a great age.²⁵



Enclosed former Flower Garden from raised terrace (north west of mansion).

To one long side of the walled Flower Garden, facing south, the wide raised terrace was probably a viewing area, and may have had a loggia upon it for shelter. Loggias were popular in the approximate period 1550 to 1625. The walled Fruit Garden is a relatively small rectangular garden, a sun trap and ideal for ripening top fruit on trees trained against the south facing wall. Two trained trees are still held against the wall but losing the battle with overgrowth. A band of stones runs horizontally through the cob wall, at about head height, on the south side of the enclosure and this would have been for fixings for the trained fruit trees. According to Mr. Fulford this garden is four to five hundred years old and may even be medieval.²⁶

Other notable external features

The lincay is late seventeenth century and situate about 40m north of the mansion, facing away from it. The roof is tiled, dating from the nineteenth or twentieth century and the walls cob on stone rubble; '10 bay with fodder storage above... Interior: pegged collar rafter roof trusses of the circa late seventeenth century...forms a group with Great Fulford House and the stable block'.²⁷

The stables were built circa 1700 of Flemish Bond brick manufactured on the Fulford estate and roofed with slate between 1749 and 1776. 'The bricks are red and were made in a field about 800m from the house, now known as brickfield. Much of the stables are still original including tack rooms, some stalls and mangers, window embrasures'.²⁸ 'An unusual feature of the building is the continuation of the end walls to the rear as full height curtain walls which conceal the rear outshut.'²⁹

On the western side of the mansion and detached from it is the Pound House where cider was made. Cider orchards existed in Devon from very early times; the cider being used in part to supplement the very meagre wages paid to agricultural labourers. All of those at Great Fulford were removed during the twentieth century.³⁰ The 1887 25th to one statute mile Ordnance Survey map and the 1906 OS map indicate orchards ('apple gardens') adjacent to the northern wall of this building and others beyond. To the west another orchard is indicated, but according to Mr. Fulford this area was previously a cob walled kitchen garden; it has that appearance from recent aerial photographs. Formerly, thatch was used atop these walls as suggested in a photograph in an article by Avray Tipping in *Country Life* in 1914.³¹ Situating the kitchen garden away from the house was argued for as early as 1659, by Sir Thomas Hamner in his *Garden Book*. Honey was close at hand, and



many pigeon holes pockmark the back courtyard.

There are about 12 of these bee-holes, each large enough to hold a skep, a coiled straw hive. They are the predecessors to modern wooden hives introduced in the late nineteenth century

The boat house, of unknown date, shown on the map of 1906 has gone. The lake was formed when the stream was dammed in 1760.³² The earthwork covered by the dam leads nowhere,



Cascades leading to partially silted up canal

suggesting that the cascades into a canal on the other side of the dam were of an earlier date than the lake. The narrow canal meanders through an overgrown copse, alongside which was once a gentle walkway but viewing the cascades now involves a precariously steep scramble through a thicket and onto a slippery wooden bridge.

Downstream water from the canal fed a series of fish (stew) ponds within the boundary of the Deer Park. The ponds, possibly medieval, are shown on old maps but are now silted up. Absent from the OS 6th (1974) map, they are mentioned by Polwhele in 1793 who described Great Fulford as 'well accommodated with gardens, fish ponds and park'.³³

In the upstream area subsequently flooded to create the lake the submerged land is relatively level. Even before Baldwin Fulford's bay-window improvements this area was directly overlooked from the house and topographically it offers a prime potential location for earlier formal gardens.

Leading away from the east range where there is now a tarmac drive bordered by turf either side, Mr. Fulford speculates on the possibility of a formal parterre in this area. Yet Tom Williamson reflecting on eighteenth century design writes 'Plain grass lawns and gravel paths had long been important in English gardens...'³⁴ Archaeologist, Robert Waterhouse, has studied aerial photographs that suggest a promenade walk here, paths running down to the lake, and the continuation of the (south) terrace to the west.³⁵

The principle entrance approach to the estate was originally from the south, where there is now the early nineteenth-century granite ashlar gothic Tower Lodge.³⁶ An avenue of native beech leads to woodland whence the carriage-drive relaxes and sweeps towards the mansion, surrounded by trees reputedly planted around 1740. This would make them of remarkable age for such species.³⁷ Beech was less commonly used for avenues than limes, elms or chestnut even though advocated by Batty Langley in his *New principles of gardening* (1728): 'It makes a stately Tree, and well deserves to be planted in our Avenues, instead of those useless Trees, the Lime and Dutch Elm'.³⁸ After the mid-eighteenth-century straight lines in garden design offended taste and fashion, hence avenues became an unusual component in garden design.³⁹ Later, the drive was re-routed, over the dam, towards the east side of the mansion when the lake was flooded. Traffic now enters from the west through Greenlane Farm, whilst yet another route via Camsland Lodge is disused and obscured.

There are extensive areas of woodland and tree planting on the estate. Currently, about 275 acres of mixed woodland is grown commercially.⁴⁰ This activity may have been significant in the disparking of 1860 since the cost of keeping the deer contained, away from the plantations, can be prohibitive. Maps show interesting archaic plantings in the wider landscape: a 'wilderness' and clearings within, possibly for privacy and contemplation; a 'grove', indicated as 'Grove Plantation'; 'Round O' Plantation and others double as decorative 'clumps'. There is also a 'Warren Run' and 'Lowerstone Burrow' associated with the many centuries during which rabbits were a valuable commodity for both their meat and skins.

Past images



Copy of 1776 drawing by Francis Towne; original held at the Tate Gallery. By permission of Francis Fulford.

The 1776 Towne sketch shows the south and east ranges in line with one and other. It flatters the mansion by depicting it much larger than it ever was. The vaguely sketched path leading south towards the lake is an impossible projection from the east entrance; it also fails to connect with the path crossing by the lake. The shape of the lake is incorrect and the fall away from the mansion is not depicted steeply enough. The stables are clearly shown in the background to the right.



Fulford House, J Gendall 1827

Gendall's interesting, but overly flattering, portrait of the mansion also shows the east and south ranges; but one next to the other rather than at right angles as they should be, thus making the mansion appear much larger.



View of a mansion in Devon called Great Fulford House, c.1850.

The anonymous c.1850 view is a far more faithful portrait. However, the large bays of c.1780 are not evident; and it omits the large windows on the ground floor either side of the arch on the east side. The multitude of chimneys has now been reduced to a very modest number. This painting may have been prepared from a much earlier image.

Conclusion

This unique site demands a thorough investigation. There are numerous primary sources held in the Devon Records Office and by the family, together with secondary sources, maps and aerial photographs. For this article only a relatively modest amount of material has been examined. In order to achieve the best interpretation a full desk survey should be made and then combined with fieldwork and archaeological surveys. The primary objective is to record the landscape history of Great Fulford in more and better detail not necessarily to reinstate the gardens and landscape.

Acknowledgement

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