

# Cowley Place

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## Introduction

Research of Cowley Place (also known as Cowley House and referred to as Cowley hereafter) has uncovered a rich and colourful garden history, with evocative detail indicative of the Picturesque era at the end of the eighteenth century and the Gardenesque period of the 1830s and 1840s. Features in the landscape, even altered or fragmented, still evident today, illustrate the history. The result is an exposition of the horticultural history of Cowley itself and its reflection of trends and events in the history, design and development of landscape, gardens, and horticulture, both locally and nationally.

## Location and early history

Cowley is situated three miles north-west of Exeter, occupying eleven acres on the north-western banks descending to the Rivers Exe and Creedy. The environs of Exeter have been known for centuries for their elms, oaks and ilex, their water meadows, and deep, shady lanes. ‘Cowley means “Cufa’s clearing” in the woods that covered this area in Saxon times’.<sup>1</sup> The most likely earliest mention of the immediate surrounds is for Brampford Speke, a village about four miles from Cowley, in the Domesday *Liber Exoniensis*, with references to land owned by the Bishop of Coutances and Baldwin the Sheriff, and quantities of cows, sheep, goats and meadow.<sup>2</sup> In 1276 Cowley was part of the manor of Duryard and Goseforde leased to Alured de la Porte for ten years.<sup>3</sup> Tristram Risdon (c. 1580-1640) mentioned the ‘conjunction of Creedy and Ex, whose course is crossed with a bridge called Cowley, of a hamlet adjoining’.<sup>4</sup>

In 1669 Cosmo III, Grand Duke of Tuscany described the route from Crediton to Exeter: ‘fields, surrounded by rows of trees, meadows of the most beautiful verdure, gentlemen’s seats, and small collections of houses’.<sup>5</sup> During the early seventeenth century Cowley belonged to the Skinner family, an ancient Devon family, with John Skinner bequeathing Cowley, farmland, pasture, and woodland, to his daughter Sarah in 1782.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century, W. G. Maton visited nearby Upton Pyne and commented on the abundant growth of wood sage, whose fruit he understood was used by the local poor as a substitute for hops.<sup>7</sup> As late as 1919 Lady Rosalind Northcote described the valley in glowing terms:

‘The site, therefore, is noteworthy as encompassing fertile farming land, orchards, and woods.’<sup>8</sup>

## Devon: background to gardens and horticulture

‘It has been said with justice that Devon, with its remarkable diversity of soils and climate, is gardening England in microcosm’.<sup>9</sup> Devon, bordered north and south by the sea, enjoys clean air, humidity, and long hours of sunshine. However, the topography of Devon with its deep, wooded valleys was not conducive to the large formal designed landscapes like those depicted by Jan Kip and Leonard Knyff in their bird’s eye view etchings.<sup>10</sup> Fruit, particularly the apple, has been an important feature of Devon’s horticulture. In the mid-eighteenth century the Cowley Crab was one of several apples identified by William Ellis and which Pugsley informs us was a ‘crab apple named after two trees that grew by Cowley Bridge’.<sup>11</sup>

The region was an early adopter of new plants from overseas due to the proximity of the ports of Plymouth and Topsham. Exeter nurseries, such as Veitch and Lucombe, Pince and Co. and Pontey’s of Plymouth, were instrumental in importing plants and then in specialising in the hybridisation of flowers. John Dominy was one key hybridiser employed by Pince and then Veitch. The brothers Lobb travelled Asia and the Americas plant hunting for Veitch in the 1840s. In the frenetic plant hunting and hybridising years of the nineteenth century many plants were discovered, grown, or named after Devon people or the county itself including *Rosa* ‘Devoniensis’, the first English tea rose.<sup>12</sup>

## Cowley Place in the eighteenth century

The first evidence of landscaping is from 1788 when Cowley was acquired by William Jackson Esquire, who was employed by the East India Company for many years. His father, known as ‘Jackson of Exeter’,



Figure 1. William Jackson, engraved from an original picture by J. Walker, 1819. © The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 2. *Seat of Jackson Esq*, John Swete, 1794, DHC, 564M/F1, South West Heritage Trust.

a popular musician and composer, was responsible for the design of the house (Figure 1). Cowley was a tall, elegant, Georgian mansion, with two large bows, typical of many of the houses built for the local gentry and professional classes in the area at this time.<sup>13</sup> 'Jackson of Exeter', also author, painter, and friend of Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), wrote to his son in 1788 with a description of the house and gardens he was planning: '[...] behind the Court is the Garden, the walls of which are everywhere hid without by a plantation.'<sup>14</sup> This letter contained a sketch of the house showing the distinctive bows and the garden behind the courtyard. The house was in a pastoral setting of rolling hills, with a variety of mature trees on the boundary and an expanse of lawn descending to the river, which meanders under Cowley bridge (Figure 2).

Cowley was created during the Picturesque period, a reaction to the influence of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783), who had been active in the region at Mamhead House and Ugbrooke, and just before the impact of Humphry Repton (1752-1818). Having first defined the term Picturesque in 1768, the Reverend William Gilpin (1724-1804) spent three decades elaborating upon this concept by a series of essays and descriptions of his extensive travels through England.<sup>15</sup> The Picturesque came to symbolise landscape that was varied and irregular, with exotics grown alongside native plants. The natural and the contrived blended to achieve a scene fit for a picture. Gilpin had a fervent follower in Exeter: the Reverend John Swete (1752-1821) who undertook journeys in Devon, described in his diaries, and illustrated by

sketches and watercolours.<sup>16</sup> His journeying brought him to Cowley at least twice, in 1794 and in 1796, with a watercolour dating from 1792 (Figure 2).<sup>17</sup> Swete wrote in 1794 that the 'place itself is the creation of the Father, and to his taste'; he thought that the grounds were 'very much circumscribed' although 'there is ample compensation in the prospect either as seen in the more sequestered walks of a hanging wood reflected in the Creedy'.<sup>18</sup> Painter 'Jackson of Exeter' clearly brought a Picturesque aesthetic to the design of the grounds at Cowley.

### The Regency period into the early nineteenth century: from Picturesque to Gardenesque

During the Regency period (1794 -1837) the tone of gardens became more playful and more floral.<sup>19</sup> There was a drift from the painting-perfect scene containing rugged elements to a deployment of flowering and evergreen shrubs. Specimen forest trees were planted as were more recently introduced exotics. Flower beds were placed away from the house and often imitated flower baskets positioned in lawns. The conservatory started to be joined to the house and flower corridors acted as inside-outside rooms.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, J. C. Loudon (1782-1843) was one of the most influential garden designers and writers. His early published views indicate what would have been evident at Cowley.<sup>20</sup> He advocated that the trees, shrubs, and flowers grown in a garden should give seasonal variety of shapes, sizes, and colour. Graceful, gravel walks should weave through the grounds and there would be greenhouses and stoves for exotics. More

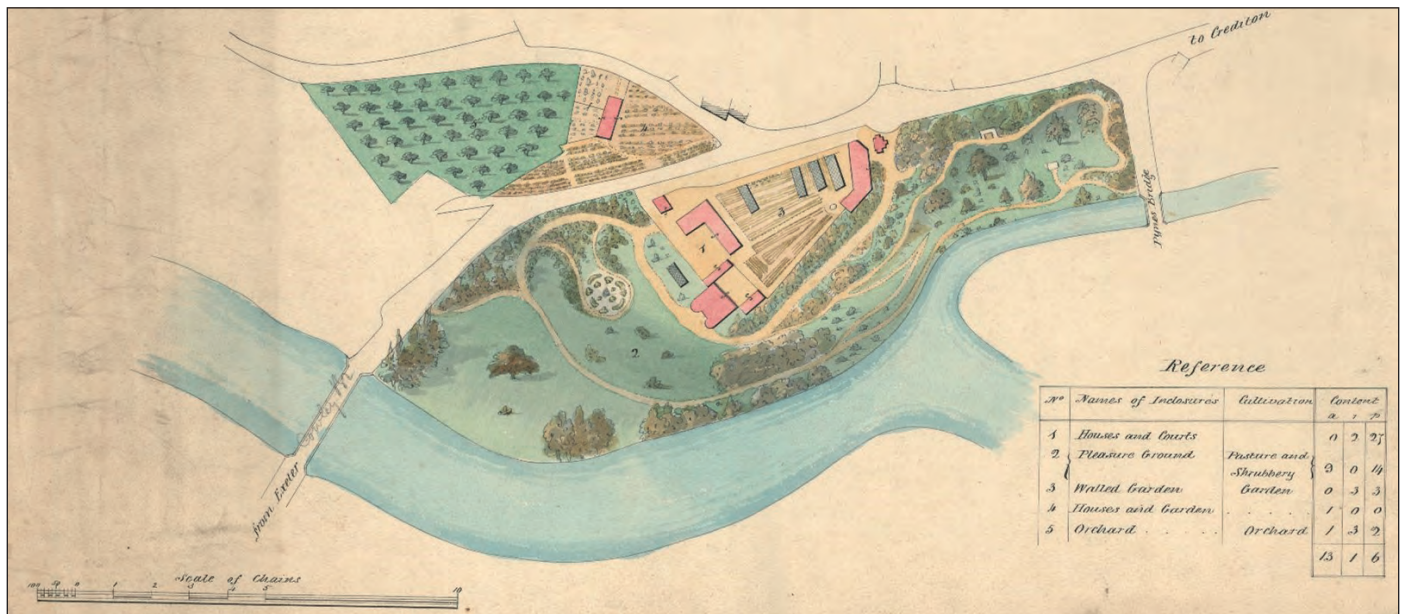


Figure 3. Cowley Place. Pencil and wash drawing, 1820? West Country Studies Library, reference P&D05591, South West Heritage Trust.

emphasis was placed on the plants and their display. Through his publications, such as the *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* and *The Gardener's Magazine*, launched in 1826, gardening was elevated to an art form attainable not only by the aristocracy and landed gentry but by middle-class villa owners too.<sup>21</sup> The gardener began to enjoy a more publicly elevated status as his responsibility increased along with the amount of botanical and technical knowledge required. Loudon advocated the Gardenesque approach to landscaping. He maintained that the mere picturesque was deficient and that the gardenesque was an art form which incorporated the gardener's knowledge of botany.

An 1810 advertisement for the sale of Cowley described 'pleasure and kitchen gardens, hot house for pines and grapes, a lawn of nearly ten acres, with walks, shrubberies, and timber trees'.<sup>22</sup> A more enticing 1811 sale notice elaborated upon 'excellent kitchen-gardens, walled, hot and green-houses, [...] surrounded by thriving plantations, lawns and woods, sloping to the river'.<sup>23</sup> In the next decades, technical advances in hothouses, the elevation of the gardener and the proliferation of new exotics would be felt in the zenith of Cowley's garden history.

### Introducing Mrs Wells: 'Flora's Devotee'

In 1816 a lease between William Jackson of Exmouth and the Reverend Joseph Wells specified 'gardens, orchards, plantations, pleasure grounds, shrubberies, lands, meadows' and 'trees, woods, underwoods'.<sup>24</sup> By the time of the death of the Reverend Wells in 1818 he and Mrs Wells were living at Cowley. The

map of Cowley Place (1820?), shows wooded land, serpentine walkways, lawns, specimen trees (including one standing alone in the middle of the grass above the river), a circular shrubbery or flower bed, well-apportioned beds in a walled area to the rear of the house featuring four glass houses with another to the side of the house (Figure 3).<sup>25</sup> An orchard and productive land are displayed across the road. The 1842 tithe records indicate pleasure grounds (about nine acres), houses, courts, a walled garden, as well as an orchard.<sup>26</sup>

Mrs Wells occupied the house until her death in 1846 and under her tenure the gardens were at their most bountiful. They became renowned for exquisite and plentiful fruit (including pineapples, grapes, plums, apples, oranges, and lemons), roses, camellias, orchids, heaths, carnations and picotees, chrysanthemums, geraniums, fuchsias, dahlias, rhododendrons, and a plethora of fashionable hothouse and green house plants and flowers. Mrs Wells employed capable gardeners; the two most publicly recognised were Mr Yole from about 1832 and Mr Griffin from about 1840 until 1846. Mr Griffin corresponded with *The Gardener's Chronicle* and with J.C. Loudon after the latter's visit to Cowley in 1842.<sup>27</sup>

Mrs Wells also had a reputation for being a generous benefactor and society hostess, holding garden parties, referred to as *fêtes champêtres*, in the pleasure grounds.<sup>28</sup> In 1844 Mrs Wells was referred to as 'Flora's Devotee', and 'a variety of the rarest Exotics, unrivalled in perfume and beauty, adorned the Conservatory Rooms and Passages, shewing that Flora's Devotee held her Feast at Home'.<sup>29</sup> The roses of Cowley



Figure 4. Cowley Place with conservatory to one side. DHC, 60/6 Box 27, Cowley Estate papers, 1875, item 19, South West Heritage Trust.

inspired a poem to a beloved, the text found in the grounds.<sup>30</sup> Society gatherings aside, the focus of the gardens until 1846 was on an extraordinary output from the walled garden and its buildings, as well the fine nurturing of the specimen trees and shrubs.

### Conservatories, hothouses, stove houses, and greenhouses

The cultivation of pineapples (*Ananas comosus*) became increasingly popular in the late eighteenth century with several treatises published between 1767 and 1789.<sup>31</sup> A favourite method of growing pineapples was in pits inside hot or stove houses which were free-standing or built against a wall, with glass roofs. Pits were sunk into the earth, filled with heat-generating horse manure covered with tanners' bark. Hothouses were also utilised for the cultivation of peaches, cherries, and grapes.

In 1810 and 1811, hothouses for pineapples and grapes and greenhouses were detailed in the Cowley House sale particulars. By the 1830s an etching shows a conservatory attached to the left of the house. It is apparent from the extraordinary variety of plants that Mrs Wells exhibited at local horticultural and floricultural shows between 1830 and 1846 that many of these would have required hothouse, greenhouse, or conservatory to thrive. The correspondence of

Mr Griffin, the gardener, with *The Gardeners' Chronicle* in 1841 discussed the merits of Corbett's hot-water apparatus, an open trough system for supplying artificial heat to hothouses; referencing orchid houses, peach houses, vineries, and pine-stoves, he explained how the size of the troughs should be varied according to the plants intended to be grown.<sup>32</sup> The conservatory was still a feature at Cowley in 1866 when it was mentioned in the sale particulars after the death of then owner, Mr Sheppard, and a conservatory is visible in the subsequent sale particulars of 1875 (Figure 4).<sup>33</sup>

### J.C. Loudon and Cowley Place

A man of enormous physical and intellectual vigour, J. C. Loudon undertook countrywide visits of noteworthy estates and reported his findings in *The Gardener's Magazine*. In September 1842, Loudon visited Cowley providing the most detailed and significant description of the grounds in their history.<sup>34</sup> He described the lawn, the woods, the views, and that Mr Pince had provided the planting. Loudon demonstrated his interest in conservatories and discussed the method used to grow the camellias and oranges. Loudon praised the gardener, Mr Griffin, and focused on the nurturing of the Cape Heaths, expressing his technical interest in the peat and stone soil. There was a 'flower garden with the



Figure 5. Cowley Place, DHC, 60/6 Box 27, Cowley Estate papers, 1875, item 19, South West Heritage Trust.

beds on gravel edged with box' and a small pinetum boasting rare specimens.<sup>35</sup> By November 1842, Mr Griffin had written to Loudon highlighting mistakes and omissions in the article. Corrections were made. Mrs Wells was 'a zealous patroness of gardening' who 'purchases all the rarest and most valuable house plants that can be obtained, so that the collection of hothouse and greenhouse plants at Cowley is one of the finest in the county'.<sup>36</sup> Also 'there are also in the shrubberies a great many of the choicest trees and shrubs'.<sup>37</sup> The article included Mr Griffin's list of the orchids, New Holland plants, greenhouse plants such as *Boronia anemonefolia*, heaths such as *Erica reflexa alba* (6ft high and 8ft in circumference), camellias (one plant of the double white having 2000 flower buds) including *Camellia japonica colvilli*, orange and lemon trees, geraniums, dahlias, carnations and pineapples, grown in a house heated by Corbett's open trough system.<sup>38</sup>

However, Loudon voiced his opinion that whilst generally excellent, the open garden was not kept as well as the plant houses. Loudon was particularly keen

on gardens being maintained in an orderly fashion as a means of distinguishing art from nature. Criticism was directed at Cowley for not keeping plants within their correct zones, not dead heading efficiently, not pruning and thinning enough, and for not keeping common shrubs from encroaching the space of rarer ones. This meant that the garden at Cowley failed Loudon's application of his term 'gardenesque'.<sup>39</sup>

### Horticulture at Cowley in the early to mid-nineteenth century: local floral and horticultural societies and exhibitions

In 1829 the Devon and Exeter Horticultural Society was founded and was soon joined by other botanical, horticultural and floral societies including the Devonshire Floral Society, the Devon County Floricultural Society and the Devon and Exeter Floricultural Society. This reflected a national trend following the foundation of the Horticultural Society of London in 1804 and the launch of competitions to exhibit flowers, plants, and fruit including dahlias, pineapples, melons, camellias, rhododendrons,



Figure 6. Cowley Place, 1875, John Hare, *The History of Cowley Place*, Plate 3.

azaleas, roses, and grapes.<sup>40</sup> Many were either new to England or were grown in a protected environment that only the wealthy could afford. In the early 1830s the regional press started reporting on exhibitions held by local societies.<sup>41</sup> By September 1840, the local Botanical and Horticultural Society had held its thirty-sixth exhibition.<sup>42</sup> It was to these events that Mrs Wells and her gardeners brought their exhibits.

Mrs Wells's fame grew between 1830 and 1846, demonstrated by the number of awards won. The achievements of the Cowley gardens were extraordinary. Mrs Wells, albeit wealthy, was competing with illustrious nurseries including Sclater, Veitch and Pince and with aristocratic landowners such as Sir Thomas Acland (Killerton), the Earl of Devon (Powderham), Lord Rolle (Bicton), and Sir John Kennaway (Escot). The walled gardens at Cowley covered three roods and three perches (less than one acre), and several types of protective houses and advanced technical knowledge would have been required.<sup>43</sup> From 1830 to 1846 the plants, flowers, fruit, and shrubs produced at Cowley proliferated. The 1845 Devon and Exeter Botanical and Horticultural Exhibition listed over thirty individual plants among them nine Cape Heaths including *Erica MacNabiana*, six orchids including *Oncidium papilio* (butterfly orchid), five hothouse plants including *Stephanotis floribunda*, azaleas and *Statice macrophylla*.<sup>44</sup> The press remarked that many of these plants were new arrivals. In 1841 Mrs Wells exhibited *Lechenaultia biloba*, identified in 1836; in 1840 she exhibited *Peristeria pendula* (dove orchid), identified by Hook in 1836 and 'not before exhibited in the West of England'; and in 1840 she exhibited *Statice arborea*, illustrated first in 1836.<sup>45</sup>

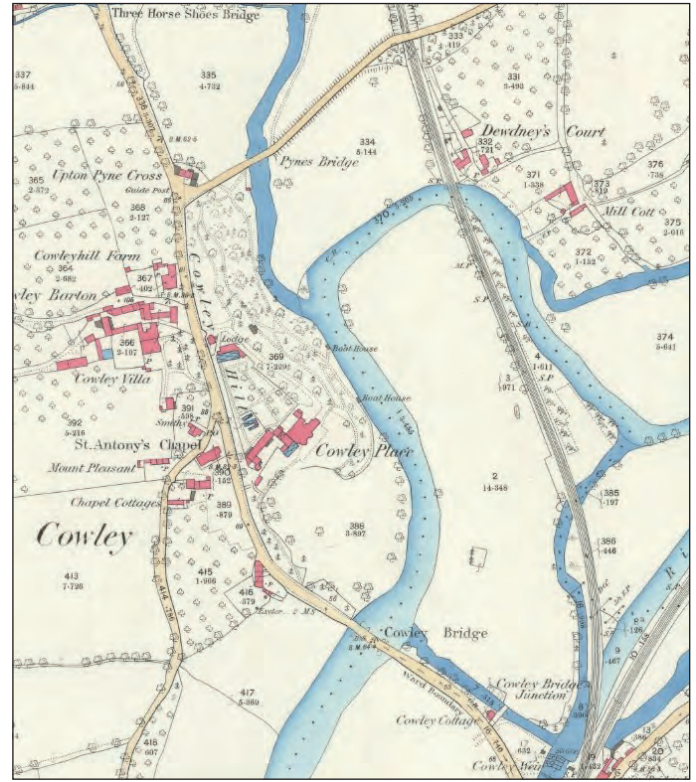


Figure 7. Ordnance Survey Devon LXVIII.13, 25 inch, surveyed 1876 to 1886, published 1889, National Library of Scotland.

*The Gardeners' Chronicle* also reported the Devon and Exeter Horticultural Society's exhibition on 22 September 1842, where Mrs Wells won many of the prizes: for pineapples, oranges, orchids, stove plants, Cape Heaths, dahlias, and greenhouse plants.<sup>46</sup>

Mrs Wells's eclectic variety of plants included many from Australasia such as *Clanthus coccineus* (parrot's bill) and *Kennedyia coccinea* (coral vine), from South and Central America such as *Alstroemeria pelegrina* (Peruvian lily) and *Manettia cordiflora* (*glabra* or firecracker vine), from the Indian Ocean such as *Musa cavendishii* (banana), heathers from South Africa and the carnivorous *Nepenthes distillatoria* (pitcher plant). A fitting tribute is *Erica ventricosa* 'Wellsiana', a variety shown by Lucombe, Pince & Co. in 1843 and named after Mrs Wells.<sup>47</sup>

During Mrs Wells's ownership of Cowley, there are additional references to the grounds: one is a sale notice for oak, elm, ash, fir, and poplar, with their tops and bark and of 'large dimensions', another is a report that two boys were fined for breaking into the garden.<sup>48</sup> After the death of Mrs Wells, Cowley did not feature in horticultural exhibitions, coinciding with a decline in grand exhibitions, partly because they had become monopolised by the very wealthy and professional nurseries.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 8. Cowley Place. Driveway, 31 December 2021. © Author.

### The garden in the second half of the nineteenth century

Sir John Duntze inherited Cowley and very quickly auctioned the ‘rare and valuable collection of Orchidaceous Plants, Heaths, Hothouse, and Greenhouse Plants’.<sup>50</sup> In the auction notice the collection was described as ‘unrivalled’, consisting of at least two hundred orchids, some very large.<sup>51</sup> There were also ‘Fruiting and Succession Pines’.<sup>52</sup> Barely two months later, an advertisement offered to give away about ‘Ten Hundred Pine Plants’, also specifying ‘Vinery, Pine, Forcing and Cold Pits, &c. &c.’ and ‘Rustic Grottoes’ and stating that ‘the Scenery is picturesque and beautiful, with a great variety of ornamental Trees and Shrubs of magnificent size and beauty’.<sup>53</sup>

By December 1846 Cowley had been purchased by Mr Joseph Sheppard, a woollen draper and in 1848 much of the hothouse and greenhouse heating equipment and frames were for sale along with plants and shrubs including dwarf box.<sup>54</sup> A gardener continued to be employed, living in a cottage on the premises. Sheppard’s will in 1862 mentions ‘plants in pots’.<sup>55</sup>

In 1875 the house was again for sale and a sketch shows a short number of steps from the terrace to the lawn, with urns of flowers and isolated clumps of flowers or shrubs in front of the house and trellis for climbing plants attached to the house (Figure 4). The particulars offer ‘Melon and Cucumber Houses’ in addition to ‘finely Timbered Pleasure Grounds and Shrubberies intersected with Winding Paths; most productive Gardens, with Hothouses, Vineries (...)’.<sup>56</sup> This is evidence that the walled garden still possessed some of its productive garden buildings. A plan of

the site shows the buildings in the walled garden, the conservatory, and structures in the grounds, one of which seemed to be at a vantage point in the hillside overlooking the confluence of the two rivers (Figure 5). It is conceivable that these structures were grottoes as mentioned in the 1846 sale particulars. The style is that of a mid-century Victorian garden, but without fashionable additions namely balustrading, carpet bedding, symmetrical parterres, wide flower borders or topiary.

There is no evidence of any impact on Cowley of the Arts and Crafts influences that swept the country from the 1870s. However, the theme of woodland and copse, also integral to William Robinson’s (1838-1935) ideas of Wild Gardening was appropriate to Cowley, with its wooded hillsides.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, Victorian fashions for tropical plants and ferns could have been satisfied. The conservatory was still in situ and ferns (possibly Hart’s-tongue fern) would have been growing naturally in the shady and damp hillside.

The Wyatt-Edgells, a military family, bought Cowley in 1875 and occupied it until the 1960s. A photograph of 1875 shows what appear to be one or two Monkey Puzzle trees (*Araucaria araucana*) to the left of the house (Figure 6). *Araucaria araucana*, popular in Victorian times, was grown from seed by nurserymen, including ‘Veitch of Exeter, for whom William Lobb collected about 3000 seeds in 1841’.<sup>58</sup> James Veitch the younger planted the avenue of Monkey Puzzle trees at Bicton in 1842. It is possible that these had been planted at the time of Mrs Wells, given their slow growth (35 cm a year).

Society functions continued at Cowley on a more subdued scale. In 1888 Wyatt-Edgell changed the name from Cowley House back to Cowley Place ‘to tally with the ordnance map as well as to suit the taste of the family’.<sup>59</sup> Contemporary Ordnance Survey maps illustrated a continuation in the division of land between lawn, meadow, woods, and walled garden with glass houses (Figure 7).

### The twentieth century

The 1903 Ordnance Survey map shows trees, glass houses still in the garden, serpentine walkways, and a structure in the wooded hillside. An inventory of outdoor effects from 1911 at the death of Arthur Wyatt-Edgell identifies:

garden tools, 36 plants (small, various), 20 (Tomatoes) in pots, 11 plants, various, 4 doz. plants (ferns and others), 2 wheel cart (painted blue and red), 2 wheel cart (old), Home made



Figure 9. Cowley, showing lawn, evergreen oak, heather, and terraces, 31 December 2021. © Author.

Donkey Cart, Home made Boat (for fishing), Garden Seat, Garden chairs (iron), 2 Wicker Chairs, Tennis net and poles.<sup>60</sup>

Some interest in gardening and in the use of the grounds for leisure is indicated and was in keeping with the way that gardens had become places of activity by the end of the nineteenth century, although a tennis court is not indicated on contemporary maps. In 1939 a gardener seems to have been living on the premises. The 1960 OS map indicated very little change from nineteenth-century maps. Cecil Wyatt-Edgell died in 1967; the house and grounds appeared neglected at its acquisition in 1968 by the Midland Bank as its regional headquarters. The Bank made alterations: the drive was moved to its present site; the entrance on the main road became pedestrian access; outbuildings were demolished to create a car park; the conservatory was refashioned into a business entertainment suite. According to the developer's document 'laying of lawns and rockeries took place' whilst 'many of the original fine trees and shrubs were allowed to remain'.<sup>61</sup>

Between 1960 and 1970 the River Exe was diverted to join the Creedy at the southern edge of the land. Between 1970 and 1980 the remaining structures in the walled garden appear to have been removed. Cowley was later sold and converted into separate units, so that since 1997 Cowley Management Company have been responsible for the landscaping and maintenance of the grounds and gardens. Whilst the current owners of Cowley Place do not have 'the funds to recreate and maintain some of its former glories', they 'replace trees as they fall/need to be felled with a view to future generations and have planted the lower side of the drive with mixed indigenous trees and shrubs.' They are 'proud of the remaining original trees e.g., the vast London planes

by the river, the cedars of Lebanon and many others.<sup>62</sup>

### Cowley Place today

The grounds of Cowley are described from time to time in estate agents' particulars.

The communal gardens and grounds (...) are a particular feature of the property. (...) The grounds are mainly made up of well-maintained parkland and wooded areas (...) Lawned gardens run down to the river and a number of paths meander through the land creating some wonderful walks.<sup>63</sup>

The sweep of the grass and the mature trees can still be seen clearly when driving across Cowley Bridge. The overwhelming impression is of woodland and natural vegetation.

The drive is bordered by English laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*) and Japanese laurel (*Aucuba japonica*) and interspersed with specimen trees such as Lebanese cedar (*Cedrus libani*), sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*), and American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) (Figure 8).

There are also large yew trees (*Taxus baccata*), lime trees (*Tilia platyphyllos*) and evergreen oak (*Quercus ilex*). There are several clumps of mature rhododendron (*ponticum, maximum and wardii*). Beehives are located near the original entrance.

The extant cedars have a circumference of between 420 cm and 470 cm giving an estimated age of about 200 years. The lawn and meadow that drift to the river appear little changed from the presentation in Swete's view. The Lucombe Oak (*Quercus x hispanica* 'Lucombeana' had to be felled after 1997, as did the Sequoia. The first Sequoia seeds were brought to England by William Lobb for Veitch's nurseries in 1853 and therefore the tree felled after 1997 would have been planted after the death of Mrs Wells. Terraces with flower urns have been created for current residents. Echoes of Mrs Wells are exemplified in a bed of heather outside what was the conservatory (Figure 9). A solitary aged mulberry tree stands at the back of the house, and nearby is a large bay laurel (*Laurus nobilis*). There is a single espaliered fruit tree, otherwise the walled garden is occupied by a tennis court and garages. The woods still descend to the River Creedy, where Hart's-tongue fern flourishes on the banks. There are signs of the weaving pathways so dear to Gilpin and Loudon, with remains of low stone edges. Rustic stone amongst the undergrowth near the river appears to indicate what could be one of the grottoes.



## Conclusion

The history of the grounds of Cowley from their inception in 1788 to the present day demonstrates the transitory nature of gardens and how a zenith of creativity and productivity can only be maintained by exceptional human involvement. The period during the mid-nineteenth century when the garden produced a superlative range of fruit, shrubs, plants, and flowers, many of which were at the forefront of

contemporary horticultural fashion, reflected local and national trends. One redeeming note, however, is that despite some changes to the grounds, the *genius loci*, with its superb specimen trees, mature shrubs, serpentine paths through the woods and views across the lawn and meadow to the hills above the rivers Exe and Creedy, would still be recognised by the former residents of Cowley Place.

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