

Rousdon: A Victorian Garden

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Henry William Peek (1825–1898) became senior partner in Peek Brothers and Co., tea and coffee merchants, of East Cheap, London from 1847 to 1895. His income was said to be in the region of a guinea a minute. Active in politics he was elected as the senior Tory MP for the Wimbledon constituency from 1868 to 1884. He founded the Movement for the Preservation of Open Spaces and in 1871 helped save Wimbledon Common from building development, ensuring its enjoyment by local people. On 13 May 1874 Henry Peek was knighted for services to science.

In 1869 Peek purchased the Rousdon estate of 350 acres for £22,500. Rousdon was a tiny cliff top parish on the Devon/Dorset border just west of Lyme Regis where a population of eighteen lived in the ‘three habitable houses’.¹

Peek and his wife Margaret were keen gardeners. Wimbledon House, their London home, had superb gardens which extended to over 100 acres. Head gardener John Ollerhead wrote that:

It is estimated that from 1886 to 1888 he [Peek] spent upwards of £30,000 in the improvement of the estate. He built a large range of glasshouses – the most extensive in any private garden in the neighbourhood of London. It is interesting to note that the heaviest bunch of bananas ever exhibited was grown in these gardens. It weighed 97 lbs and was shown at the Royal Horticultural Society Exhibition in 1877, where it gained a gold medal.²

It was natural that the same care would be lavished on the garden at Rousdon and Sir Henry Peek employed a leading landscape designer of the day, Robert Marnock (1800–1889), who had previously worked on the grounds at Wimbledon House.³ Marnock’s first major design work had been in 1833, when he won a competition to design the Sheffield Botanical Gardens. He later designed the Royal Botanic Society’s garden at Regent’s Park in 1839 becoming its curator from 1841 to 1863. Other gardens he was associated with included Cliveden, Ragley Hall, Victoria Embankment gardens, Warwick Castle and Studley Royal Water Gardens. Rousdon



Grounds c. 1905

was his last garden design and he was still working on it when he died in 1889.

Marnock’s designs were similar to those of Humphry Repton: ‘he produced ingeniously contrived landscapes, with informal flower gardens near the domestic quarters. He eschewed terraces, vases and stonework entirely’.⁴ Marnock disliked bedding schemes, ‘the dotting of trees and shrubs on lawns like sentinels ... or placing anything on a lawn at all which in any way interrupted the view or defaced the space’.⁵ This style of garden design became known as ‘The Gardenesque’ and included great sweeps of well kept lawns with well placed clumps of trees and shrubs as well as individual specimen trees. The gardens were designed to be run effectively and economically avoiding labour intensive effects such as wall-trained shrubs. Marnock’s plans for Rousdon were prepared in the summer of 1873 and the planting of the major tree groups began shortly after. His design drawings were meticulous and the ones he made of the proposed drainage scheme for the walled garden were incredibly detailed.⁶

Marnock was responsible for planting the parkland. The whole garden was sheltered by plantation belts comprising pines, thuja, cypress, copper beech, maple and other ornamental trees. Hydrangeas were planted in great numbers: trees were under-planted with spring bulbs. The carriageway had an avenue of cypress trees planted the entire length. When the avenue matured, Mrs Critchard, whose family



View from the terrace 1905



Inside the Walled Garden

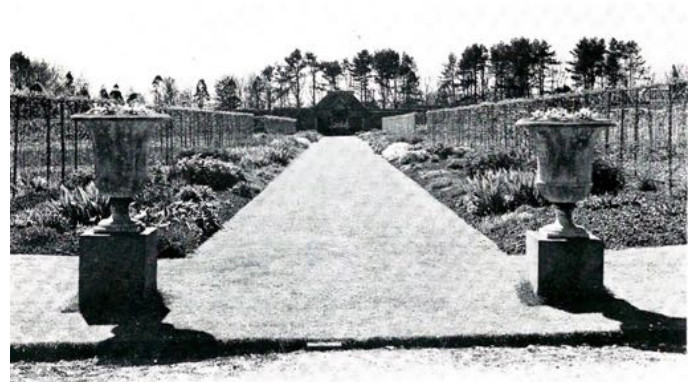
lived on the estate, thought it was very gloomy. The tree belts also screened the access route for the labourers to get to their places of work. Planting of shrubs to act as windbreaks and to beautify the grounds was carried on for several years.

In 1881 the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* described the gardens and park on the south side of the mansion:

Away to the left, and a few feet from the mansion, you come to the archery and croquet grounds, bordered by a carriage-drive and shrubberies. In front of these, stretching towards the south, are the terraces and pleasure grounds, the latter studded with groups of choice shrubs, while here and there are a few stunted trees, with gnarled moss-clad trunks. The south front looks directly over the sea, and commands a wide view of it ... The grounds on the south front adjoining the mansion are laid out in terraces and walks, ornamental shrubberies and rockeries. At the western end there is also a prettily-designed artificial lake with islands.⁷

The gardens and grounds were laid out for both pleasure and exercise as well as being a source of fruit, flowers and vegetables. Along the south front the lawn was edged by a ha-ha, so that the view to the sea was uninterrupted. To the west of the terrace was a mound where a bandstand was built. On the slopes below the terrace lawn Robert Marnock planted a fine selection of trees, with walks winding through them.

The walled garden was entered by either the east or west covered gateways. On the two south corners gazebos were built from which panoramic views of the bay could be seen.⁸ The north side was closed by grape houses with an orangery in the centre and hot houses for melons and cucumbers. To the north of the walled garden there was a courtyard with a terrace and around this were sheds, storerooms, and greenhouses. In the frame yard early plants were raised on hot beds made from dung, leaf mould and soil. Trucks ran down a set of rails directly from the stables. Soil for the walled garden had to be imported, as the natural soil was too chalky. There was a palm house to rear plants for display in the mansion and another where rare flowers were grown. In 1876 Peek exhibited 'rare orchids' at the Royal Horticultural Society's Spring Show. Here also was the head gardener's office, the furnace room for heating the range of glass houses and accommodation for the garden men, which included a bothy laid out for up to five men with separate cubicles for sleeping, plus 'a dining room kitchen, and a room set apart as a hospital; also a good lofty and



The Walled Garden 1937

spacious reading room well stocked in books of literature, together with newspapers'.⁹ There was also a small two roomed bothy cottage. Another row of cottages by the glass houses near the walled garden included the head gardener's house.

By the track down into the cliffs were the children's gardens. A circle of yews was planted close together which would eventually grow to join up and form a playhouse. There were small ponds with bridges over them. Palms, hydrangeas and snowdrops were planted and small, winding paths edged by stones and shells were laid out. Below the children's gardens an elaborate summerhouse was built looking out down the steep valley to the sea. Here the family could sit and take tea – there was a room in the summerhouse from which the butler and maids could serve them. The valley had a flight of descending pools linked by waterfalls. It was planted with exotic plants including pampas grasses, *Lobelia tupa* and Strawberry trees (arbutus), as the microclimate there was so mild. At the bottom of that 'steep sided valley' was a small harbour which Sir Wilfred had had blasted out from the rock. The path down to it was planted with rhododendrons, arbutus and other ornamental shrubs. The trees with 'moss covered trunks' included two ash trees that had grown beside the original farmhouse. Various walks and rides were also laid out including the Ladies Walk, which ran from the West Lodge drive and curved around into the Undercliff.

A postcard of about 1900 shows a very elaborate bedding scheme on the lawn just below the terrace, with gardeners



Bedding below the terrace 1902

laying out the plants in beds cut into a shape reminiscent of the shapes on Paisley shawls. Robert Marnock would not have approved – stonework, urns and bedding all on one photograph of Rousdon. By 1920 the parkland to the north of the mansion was maturing, the grounds described as ‘beautifully timbered’.¹⁰

Cuthbert Peek, the son of Sir Henry and Lady Margaret, showed an early interest in gardening. At prep school he wrote home to his mother about the different varieties of Parma violets and wondered if hyacinth bulbs would grow in water in his room. He asked that she send him some flowering pot plants, and, on another occasion, he asked for ‘some of the cucumber seeds which Ollerhead is growing now, they are a very short kind’. He had promised to give a friend the seed.¹¹

As he grew older, during his extensive travels, Cuthbert sent home many seeds, cuttings and plants. On an Australian trip he visited a nurseryman, Hartsmann, who sent plants to Kew. From him he bought a Wardian case, costing £6, which he packed with plants, and 30/- worth of seeds to be carried to Rousdon with orders that written instructions from the nurseryman should be followed.¹²

Flowers were very important to the Peeks. Sir Henry would commission his gardeners to attend sales of plants. ‘Mr Leaf’s plants were sold on Monday. Ollerhead bought a magnificent *Lapageria rosea* in a tub for £5, and also a few orchids’.¹³ There are numerous mentions of flowers being sent all over the country. Wherever Cuthbert was, his mother, Margaret, sent him fresh flowers for his rooms. They agreed that camellias and gardenias did not travel well and should be avoided, but hyacinths were a great favourite. She would send flowers to Sir Henry for his buttonholes when he was sitting in Parliament: ‘I send you two flowers hoping one will be fresh for tomorrow’. Until the gardens at Rousdon were producing, flowers were sent down regularly from Wimbledon to decorate the church as well as to the Rev. Edward Peek’s house in Lyme.

When the family was in residence the head gardener would go each morning to the house to see what was wanted that day. Every morning at 8 o’clock the gardeners would set out cut flowers and pot plants. Traditionally palms were placed by the great fireplace and also by the grand piano in the hall. When the family was staying at their London house, vegetables, fruit and flowers would be loaded at Compyne station and sent up to town. Apart from growing the flowers, the head gardeners were responsible for decorating the mansion and the church. On special occasions such as balls and weddings, the quantity of flowers used was prodigious as at Margaret Peek’s wedding:

The church was beautifully decorated by Mr A.E. Bailey, the estate gardener, with lilies of the valley, spirea, lilliums, Michaelmas daisies, asparagus ‘Sprenger’, with a glorious background of ferns and palms. Three hundred “favours” of white heather and marguerites were distributed to the guests ... the sills of the stained glass windows were filled by Bailey with pot plants grown in the small span greenhouses to the north of the grape house.¹⁴

There was also a tradition at Rousdon that the graves were decorated inside with flowers. Mr Bath lined the grave of

Sir Cuthbert with ‘roses, dahlias, chrysanthemums, moss and ivy’.¹⁵ The gardens would also provide flowers and greenery to decorate other occasions. In 1879, ‘The brilliant scarlet bracts of Poinsettias were sent by Sir Henry Peek to decorate the RHS show’ in London. In 1926 the ballroom for the Devon County Ball was decorated with flowers and evergreens given by his grandson, Sir Wilfred Peek.

Surplus vegetables were loaded into the pony cart and taken to be sold to two different shops in Seaton. Any not sent for sale would be put by the frames for the staff to help themselves. Apart from their own cottage gardens, the workers also grew their own vegetables in plots that were made available to them to the west of the walled garden. Storage of fruit over the winter was a problem. Cuthbert sent his mother a “device for preserving grapes”. Apples were spread out on the floor of Sir Henry’s tower. One of the Critchard boys had the job of boxing up the apples for the kitchen – and presumably removing any rotten ones.

Visitors

The gardens were shown to many visitors. When Mary, Lady Monkswell visited in 1897, she wrote in her diary:

Wed. 20th April. I afterwards set out in Mrs Peek’s galoshes and rain cloak and went around the dependences. The stables where seven great horses were snoozing in luxurious loose boxes, the stables for *neighbours’* horses ... the marble tanks for fish, the wrought iron well, the church which he had restored and lastly the walled garden. Rousdon stands so high that the great enemy is the wind. Besides an exceedingly high and massive garden wall the vegetables and fruit and roses are grown inside four great squares of yew hedges. A very solid pergola cuts this into four, and over them – a very pretty idea – are trained, not only roses and creepers, but fruit trees.¹⁶

In June of 1900, the Association of Head Gardeners of Exeter visited and were duly impressed with ‘the contrast between the natural and artificial’ and the use of ‘Modern gardening science ... the principal features being pointed out by Mr Bailey, the head gardener.’¹⁷

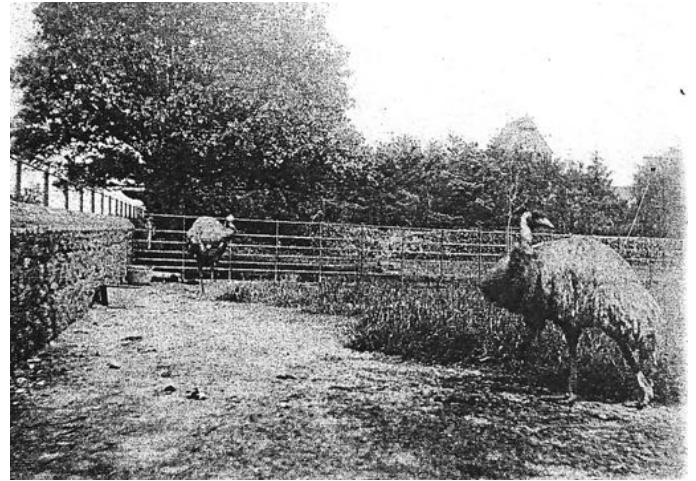
A month later it was the turn of The Devon and Exeter Gardeners Association to be shown around by Bailey:

[He] showed them the range of glasshouses, 600 feet in length, in which Peaches, Nectarines and Grapes, (Lady Downes and Muscats chiefly), were doing well. The lengthy trellised-walks of *Cotoneaster* and *Appletrees* and the hedges of *Escallonia macrantha* and *Pyrus japonica* were also noted and much more besides.¹⁸

When John R. Jackson visited Rousdon in the summer of 1902, he thought that some of the glasshouses were not as modern as they might be, but:

... [everything] kept in good order and condition. The same may be said of the plants themselves, for though nothing is grown of a special character, and flowers and fruit are cultivated only for the supply of those on the estate, all the contents of the glasshouses and grounds appear to have an equal share of attention. *Gloxinias* and *Begonias*, both single and double, were at the time of my visit at the beginning of August beginning to

make a show. The plants not being crowded as is too often seen were, so to speak, individualised, so that the shape and growth of each showed compactness, uniformity and health. The same may be said of a group of *Kalanchoe flammula* which, I was informed, had been in flower for a period of six weeks. A group of red and yellow *Celosias* were prettily arranged, and produced a striking effect. In the Camellia house, which is a spacious building, I was struck with the numerous pendant baskets filled with a luxurious growth of the beautiful *Asparagus 'Sprengeri'*. Nor does the floral or decorative side of the garden seem to occupy Mr Bailey's whole attention; melons, Grapes and the usual fruits are grown with equal success, though he told me that apricots do not succeed at Rousdon.¹⁹



Emus in their pen by the church

The gardeners

The Peeks employed many gardeners. At one stage it was recorded that they employed twelve indoor gardeners, working in the glasshouses, and twelve outdoor gardeners. Sir Henry's head gardener in 1897 was Mr Alfred Jacobs.²⁰ Prior to this John Ollerhead was listed as head gardener in Kelly's *Directory*.²¹ The 1891 census lists Arthur Tilt, Frank Restrict and Albert Gunner, all as gardeners. An advertisement in an 1891 newspaper gives an idea of the skill required, 'Journeyman gardener wanted. Young man or strong youth, to work under the foreman, must be accustomed to vinerias, peach house, watering plants etc. Apply J. Ollerhead'.

In 1901 there were four journeymen gardeners, (men who were in training and were paid by the day), living in the bothy, three of whom were Walter Symes, Henry Fulford, and George Hawker: William Jefford was a garden labourer; Alfred Farmer was a fourteen year old gardener's boy. Albert Bailey was head gardener. He bred and sold rare breeds of chickens and other poultry as well as keeping bees. He stayed until 1913. The 1911 census lists six under-gardeners: Emmanuel Tolman, William Jefford, Alec Buck, Lewis

Smith, James Saunders and Walter Suckling. The last four were living in the bothy.

By 1927 Mr Iles was a garden boy. His workmates included five outdoor gardeners: Walter Rowe, Mannie Tolman and his son Arthur, John Baisley and Arthur Critchard. There were four indoor gardeners: Mr Bath the head gardener, Herbert Johnson, Horace George and Mr Iles. Mr Iles recalled:

The walled garden was divided into four and in it were grown tomatoes, vines, figs, peaches, nectarines, plums "they really were corkers!", and soft fruit, as well as vegetables. There was a walnut tree below the terrace and sometimes I and George Snell, who was another gardener's boy would go in the lunch hour and knock some nuts down.

Malcolm Bath was head gardener from 1923 until the early 1930s. He was followed by Arthur Critchard who stayed on after the sale of Rousdon to Allhallows School in 1937.



Pool in the children's garden at Rousdon

The Peeks were very fond of keeping pets. Horses and dogs, emus and golden pheasants and, even at one stage, a giraffe who had free run of the gardens. Sir Wilfrid was only dissuaded from releasing ostriches into the Undercliffs by the Coastguards, who thought it might interfere with their work.

George Gill, a gardener in 1912, recalled:

During the time of Sir Wilfrid, who, like all the wealthy Victorian land owners treated his employees with a mixture of dictatorship and paternalism, sometimes acting as though they were all one big happy family, at others showing no mercy and even turning some unfortunate workers out of their homes for minor infringement of the rules. One example of the paternalism occurred when Sir Wilfrid Peek returned from the United States of America, where he had just been married. Upon their arrival back all their tenants and employees, together with their families, were invited to a slap up tea. Their employer's callousness manifested itself when a gardener was caught taking home a sprig of musk from out of the Rousdon Mansion gardens, to put in his cottage garden, owned by Sir Wilfrid. On being discovered doing this he was instantly dismissed from his employment and ordered to vacate his cottage.²²

In 1937 Rousdon estate was put on the market. Sale particulars described the mature gardens. To the west was a large, ornamental pond with goldfish and black swans. To the south of the pond and below the terrace was a sunken garden and a rose garden. A mound near the church was the pets' cemetery. Also near the church was the pen where emus were kept:

[There is] a Broad Walk 18' wide and extending the full length of the Pleasure Grounds. Adjoining this are Tennis and Croquet Lawns with space for several courts. A water garden inset by a miniature islet and enclosed by flowering shrubs. Adjoining is a sheltered lawn and beyond is a Circular Rose Garden with turf walks intersecting beds of dwarf roses and encircled by a pergola walk covered by ramblers. Beyond is a rockery garden. On the eastern side of the house is a spacious sheltered lawn enclosed by clipped Yew hedges and of sufficient size to provide another five or six tennis courts, if desired. On one side is a yew walk. At the western end of the broad walk is a Walled Garden, a spacious enclosure of some four acres, entered through beautifully-wrought iron gates and divided by a broad turf walk flanked by herbaceous borders and rose screens. The walls are covered with trained fruit trees, the paths are flanked by bush fruit trees, and both flowers and fruit flourish exceedingly in the fertile soil and warm sunny atmosphere. Evidence of this is

given by an immense tree fuschia, one plant having a diameter of over 10ft. In the walled garden are Ranges of Heated Glass-houses ... Adjoining is a frame yard in which are melon, tomato and Chrysanthemum Houses, carnation and stove houses, ranges of pits, also potting, tool and barrow stores, stoke hole and gardener's office. South of the walled garden is a broad vegetable border, the wall being covered by fruit trees, and along this walk is a magnificent hedge of escallonia. The grounds also include many other Woodland and Shrubbery walks between clumps and belts of Cypresses, Prunus, Spirea and Pines, and masses of hydrangeas.

The mansion, together with outbuildings, gardens and grounds, occupied an area of about 25 acres. There was also about 182 acres of woodland. The sale catalogue is illustrated with various photographs of the grounds and gardens, and it is interesting to see Marnock's original plantings nearly sixty years later.

References

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20. Kelly's *Directory for Devon*, (1897).
21. Kelly's *Directory* (1889; 1893). According to the Surrey Electoral Registers and the 1881 and 1891 census for Rousdon, both John and James Ollerhead worked and lived at Rousdon (and had property in Wimbledon). James Ollerhead died 1 April 1928 leaving his estate of £4,723 2s 5d to his widow Mary.
22. George married Caroline, the twenty one year old daughter of his fellow gardener, Albert England, at Axmouth in 1913. He was 38. They had five children.