

# Oldway – Versailles on the English Riviera

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The Devon Gardens Trust has long had a history of recording and helping to conserve the Grade II listed gardens at Oldway Mansion in Paignton. Originally the home of the Singer family, the house and its remaining estate became the property of Paignton Urban Council in the 1940s. Negotiations lasting from 2010 to 2012 between Torbay Council, the successor to Paignton Urban Council, and developers, the Akkeron Group, resulted in Oldway being leased to Akkeron to develop part of the site for housing, to turn the mansion into an up-market hotel and to revitalise these important gardens.

As a volunteer garden recorder, I travelled to Paignton with Carolyn Keep and Helen Whitmore in the late summer of 2012 to update our record on this extraordinary piece of history, surrounded as it is today by modern residential Paignton, and to capture its essence before the planned changes. However, at the time of printing, there is no sign of any progress on the development of the Oldway site. Indeed the *Torquay Herald Express* newspaper reported, on 26 January 2016, that the developer has initiated court action against the Council for various breaches of agreement. Whilst the Council has robustly defended its stance, this could delay further any start to the work.

Turning into the estate from what is now the main entrance off Torquay Road, one is immediately struck by the astonishing, ice-cream palace of a mansion dominating its surrounding gardens. In no small measure, Paignton Urban District Council, and latterly Torbay Council, must be recognised for the upkeep of the house and gardens over the decades since 1946, as they remain in a state of considerable preservation. The history and development of Oldway since its original inception by Isaac Singer and the substantial changes made by his son Paris Singer at the beginning of the twentieth century are well documented by Paul Hawthorne.<sup>1</sup> He, along with the Friends of Oldway, are to be applauded for having worked so hard and done so much to ensure this unique property will be preserved for future generations to enjoy.



*South front of mansion showing steps used to define central path*

The following article is an abridged version of the updated findings which we recorded for the Trust, the full version being available from the Trust.

## The historical context

Oldway was originally a 100 acre estate accumulated by Isaac Singer, of sewing machine fame. Mr Singer left America for France in 1862 where he married and started his family. Ten years later the Franco Prussian war drove them from Paris, via London, and finally to Paignton where Mr and Mrs Singer and their six children moved into a house in the grounds, called Oldway Villa (later known as Little Oldway and now a residential home separate from Oldway itself). His new house, designed by local architect G.S. Bridgeman and known as the Wigwam, was large and comfortable with extraordinary glasshouses on the front through which carriages arrived at the front door. There were also two other important buildings almost adjacent – the Rotunda, for stabling and exercising horses, and the Banqueting Suite, for the great entertainments which Mr Singer liked to hold. The gardens at the time were laid out in the Victorian style with formal beds and fountains, and extensive orchards at the western end.

Isaac Singer died in 1875 having never lived in his Wigwam and four years later the family moved back to Paris. Isaac's sons continued their interests in Paignton and, after many vicissitudes, in 1897 Paris Singer, the third son, took ownership of Oldway and the grounds with his Australian wife Lillie.<sup>2</sup> Under Paris the house and estate took on a very different shape. He was determined to bring Versailles to Paignton and hired Achille and Henri Duchêne to help him achieve this. The Duchênes had been involved with restoring the gardens and buildings of both the Petit Trianon and the Palace of Versailles and their designs for Oldway and its grounds were executed over the next decade. The south-east corner of the gardens, given over to more natural landscaping and planting, was the responsibility of Robert Veitch & Son from Exeter. Their landscape gardener, F.W. Meyer, created a large and impressive rockery in this area of the garden.

With some similarity to his father, Paris only lived at Oldway a short time – for four years from its transformation to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. It was during this time that he had a tempestuous affair with the dancer Isadora Duncan. The house became an American army hospital in the war and then in 1919 the property was sold to a Singer family company, the Paignton and District Land Development Company. Through the inter-war period, Oldway was home to various sports clubs, culminating as the Torbay Country Club in 1929. Some members of the Singer family continued to live in parts of the house and the grounds were maintained to a high standard by the Country Club ground staff.

Paris Singer died in 1932 and during World War II the RAF requisitioned the house and grounds. It was through Paris's will that Paignton Urban District Council came to own Oldway. Given the ravages of the war (Oldway suffered two direct attacks) and shortage of money, the grounds were in a bad state by then. The Council's Parks Supervisor, a Mr Erskine, and his staff worked wonders in gradually restoring the grounds to what is seen today.

## The gardens and grounds of 2012

In the late summer of 2012, Oldway stood much as it had since the house and grounds were sold to Paignton Urban Council by the Singer family in December 1946 for £45,000.

The current approach to Oldway is up a short drive off Torquay Road in a residential area of Paignton. The mansion itself is striking – it is large and ornate, painted powder blue and looking in need of some care and attention. The car park is on the north side of the house giving access to the main entrance. The Rotunda and Banqueting Suite buildings are in the north-west corner of the car park and are quite dilapidated and boarded off.



*Parterre terrace*



*Versailles urn on parterre balustrade*

## The parterre terrace

Guarding the entrance to the east terrace from the car park are a pair of sphinxes, classically Egyptian in appearance. These sphinxes, as well as the walls on which they stand, are the first of many English Heritage (now Historic England) listed items in the gardens and in common with a number of other features in the garden are exact copies of those at Versailles. The east terrace is a mixture of lawn and parterre sections but the actual layout of lawn and parterre has changed a number of times over the years. It is now laid out from the north to the south as lawn, parterre, parterre, lawn.



*Sphinx on east terrace*

In the middle, between the two parterre beds, is a metal 'ornament'. It cannot be ascertained whether the original Duchêne design, showing two similar planting areas either side of a pool containing fountains, was ever executed.

The conifer 'cones' at the southern end are still in evidence although these are relatively new replacements for older ones which had become overgrown.<sup>3</sup> The whole terrace, from the edge of the house, along the side of the car park and then all along the eastern edge of the terrace, has a low wall, balustraded round the car park end and topped with fourteen urns at regular intervals.

Along the west side of the parterre terrace there is a long herbaceous bed under the wall retaining the lawned area of the higher garden. Lining up with the path across the south face of the house and the steps down to the hippodrome, there is a double set of steps down to the parterre, with a niche in the centre containing statues of Pan and Bacchus. English Heritage notes these are 1950s replacements for the original Duchêne statues – a muse with amorini (cherubs representing cupid) above.

There is a flight of steps from the parterre to the lower grassed area. This grassed area was known by the Singers as the hippodrome and Paris had it levelled, thereby generating the soil used for the mound embankment along the Torquay Road. This embankment would have provided privacy from the burgeoning suburbs of Paignton, while still allowing views to the sea. The sea views are now mostly obscured by trees and shrubs growing by and on the embankment itself. The trees in the hippodrome include a sweet chestnut and a grove of pines at the south end which could be over 100 years old and therefore planted at the time the gardens were designed.

## The south terrace

The south terrace is lawned with a gravel path round all four sides. There are conifer cones along the two sides, similar to those on the parterre terrace. In Paris's time, there were orange trees in tubs lining the grass areas with a wide central path leading from the house to a terrace at the far end which itself was lined with statues. This terrace could have been known as the Greek Garden and certainly would,



*Niche with Pan*



*Duchêne drawing showing amorini  
Courtesy of Devon Heritage Centre*

in early days, have had wonderful views to the sea and the surrounding countryside.<sup>4</sup> Its south-eastern end was actually formed from glass tiles which were the roof of the Orangery, set in the lower part of the garden. The arrangement of this area and its link to the parterre terrace has changed, probably when the Orangery was demolished after being damaged in the Second World War. Steps and walls have been changed and realigned and no longer show the symmetry of the Duchêne original design. Two more sphinxes rest at either end of the broad steps from the terrace in front of the house to the lawned area. These are quite different from those on the east terrace and Duchêne had them carefully copied from those at the Petit Trianon.

On the west side there is a small bank up to another parallel path which is lined by an avenue of limes of varying ages, some of which have been pollarded. There are remnants of what might have been an outer line or avenue of sweet chestnuts along the original driveway which entered the grounds from the western end. At the bottom end of the lime avenue path, steps lead down onto the terrace and one

rustic stone seat can be seen in the curved wall – there might originally have been two. From this terrace, steps descend to an area which was originally known as The Orchard. At the bottom of these steps, within the wall, is a blocked up doorway – possibly to a storeroom. The Orchard area is bounded at the eastern end by a wall on the line of the side wall of the Orangery.

### **The Rockery and Tropical Garden**

Although M H Duchêne was in charge of the total overall design at Oldway, the commission for the rockery and water gardens, an area more natural than the rest of the gardens, was given to Robert Veitch & Son and designed and laid out by F.W. Meyer. From the southern end of the eastern (parterre) terrace, steps lead down through the rockery and onto a grassed area. This part of the rockery was created when the Orangery was demolished and the grassed area is now quartered lawns with a Torbay palm in the middle. This section of the garden will be changed over the next few years as the developers plan to rebuild the Orangery as a public space facility.

With regard to the main rockery, Devon Gardens Trust member Carolyn Keep has extensively researched the design work undertaken by Meyer.<sup>5</sup> It is not the purpose of this article to repeat her findings but reference will be made to some of the aspects she has raised and recorded in her book on the area in question. The rockery and grottoes with cascades merge into a stream running into lakes below at the south-east corner of the grounds. Meyer wrote extensively about the commission and used the project at Oldway to demonstrate what could be achieved in an area where the owner was unable to appreciate what could be done with such 'a remote corner ... which is quite irregular'.<sup>6</sup> Although currently in a considerable state of disrepair there is still much in evidence of Meyer's design. In constructing the grottoes, large rocks were moved into place on a trolley that ran on portable rails resulting in a cave with two openings. Whilst in a sorry state, the rocks are still visible today, albeit



*Versailles sphinx on south of mansion*



*Lower pond and picturesque garden*

propped up and with a barrier closing the area from access.

The remaining original F.W. Meyer rockery now starts just before the area containing the pool and grottoes and extends right down almost to the driveway as it turns the corner to run parallel to the Torquay Road. In front of the grotto pool is another rockery and pool area through which is cut a water course leading eventually to the final pond. This pond is leaking, the water flow turned off and the water courses dry. There is however water in the grotto pools still and these contain fish. A number of manhole covers are visible in the area and it is understood that the water is pumped through the grounds from Manor Road having in the past been partially restored by Torbay Council.<sup>7</sup> The remainder of this area of the garden is well covered with trees and plants, some of which are sub-tropical; Meyer's original planting included opuntias as well as palm trees and cordylines. The current proposals for renovation of the site include restoration of the Meyer rockery.

In his design Meyer planned wooden bridges and a summerhouse, the latter in the style of a Swiss chalet to sit above the largest pond.<sup>8</sup> From this lower final pond, there are signs of steps ascending through the rockery to a level area and a photograph taken during the construction of the rockery shows a wooden frame in the process of being erected in this exact spot. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the spot would have afforded excellent views across the landscape to the sea but today trees and buildings block what would have been the original vista. From this highest point of the rockery at the south-eastern end, paths lead to a visible octagonal area which is shown on Meyer's original plan. Views from these higher points would have been good in both directions, for example, over the tropical valley and pools and also to the west and south, over Paignton and to the sea.

### **The eastern and northern boundaries**

The land on this side, outside the formal gardens and spanning either side of the drive, is given over to sport of one kind or another – tennis courts on the west side of the drive and bowls, indoor and outdoor, on the east. The housing development about to start will be situated behind the outdoor bowls club pavilion and round to the current indoor bowls hall. The latter will move to a spot by the tennis courts.



*Triumphal arch*

### **The original driveway**

When Oldway was at its most splendid, visitors would enter the estate at the south-east corner and drive up the west side, through wooded planting, arriving at the extraordinary Triumphal Arch, the western entrance to the parking area in front of the house. Although earlier maps show no trees around the Arch itself, the area is now overgrown and the impact lost because of encroaching trees and vegetation. The Banqueting House is boarded up and the Rotunda next to it is also closed.

### **Hope for the future?**

Given the passage of time and the fact that they are open to the public, the grounds at Oldway are in remarkably good order. Lawns are neat, bedding and herbaceous plants well tended, paths swept and trees relatively well managed. It is with anticipation that we look to the future and hope that agreement can soon be reached between Akkeron and the Council in order to protect this extraordinary but important site on our Devon Riviera.

### **References**

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2. Cecilia Henrietta Augusta Graham known as Lillie was born 6 June 1867 in Perth, Australia – they married in Hobart, Tasmania.
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4. John Wilson, personal communication to DGT in response to a planning consultation (July 1997).
5. Carolyn Keep, *F.W. Meyer (1852–1906): A Landscape Gardener in Devon* (2015), pp. 37-43.
6. F.W. Meyer, *Rock and Water Gardens*, (1910), pp. 9-14, 27, 62-6.
7. F. Ralph Penwill, *Paignton in Six Reigns*, (Paignton UDC, 19530, p. 153.
8. F.W. Meyer, *Die Gartenkunst*, III/9 (1901–2), pp. 173-5, 177, 179.

Photographs: Judy Walton, Helen Whitmore.