

BUILDINGS IN SOMERSET PARKS AND GARDENS

An excellent talk by James Bond was held in a rather chilly Wyndham Hall. We started by considering evidence of long “rooms” in Roman villas, which may have been loggias and travelled briefly in time through the Middle Ages with a look at Dovecotes such as that at Dunster. With the development of deer parks, keepers lodges took on more importance with examples of multi functional use such as at Hardington with its first floor banqueting hall and date of 1581. The multi-use could be domestic, functional or ornamental and by way of ornamental, a mock castle was built on a promontory at Walton in Gordano in the 16th century when the concept of visual “prospects” with mounds started to come into fashion.

From the 18th century, gate lodges acquired greater importance for the frequently rebuilt mansions, for example that at Ammerdown (James Wyatt 1755), at Montacute (1790) and Redlynch (1720). At Orchardleigh, a rather splendid castellated lodge was built for £816! In the 19th century, the Cottage Orné style became more prevalent as at Blaise Castle and Halswell House and the later Victorian Age provides many examples of lodges with decorative ironwork gateways to public parks.

Courtyards such as that at Montacute (late 16th century and originally used for carriages) featured and small towers as at each corner here were copied elsewhere as at Nether Stowey. The tower at Clevedon Court dates back to the 16th century also. Alfred’s tower was built between 1769 and 1792 for Henry Hoare of Stourhead and Conygar Tower at Dunster in 1775 for Sir Henry Luttrell. On Conygar hill, there is a further designed “ruined” gateway.

Another multi-purpose building was “Robin Hood’s Hut” at Halswell, now renovated by the Landmark Trust. Also there are the Bailiff’s House and the Temple of Pan in different styles from the classical “Temple of Harmony”. Classical influence is also evident at Leigh Court with its “rotunda”. On the other hand, Prior Park has a gothic style temple.

From the early 18th century, kitchen gardens become more refined in design and were often located well away from the main house. The demand for exotic fruit gave rise to orangeries (the delightful example at Hestercombe was shown) and also pineapple houses. With the arrival of plate glass from 1845, new possibilities for glasshouses developed.

Finally, we looked at a couple of examples where major works to parks had affected the whole landscape, these being firstly West Quantoxhead where the park was enlarged bit by bit and the Church is now isolated within the park. The other was at Marston Bigot where the whole village was removed and the Church rebuilt there in order to improve the view.

The many illustrations demonstrated well how ideas had developed and fashions changed through the centuries. Many of the examples are well known to members and this filled in the background to enhance our enjoyment of the fine parks and gardens with which Somerset is endowed.

