

Quarrendon: How the Elizabethans revolutionised garden design

By Neil Faulkner. Published in Current Archaeology May 2008

In the late 16th century, leading courtier Sir Henry Lee, anticipating a visit by Queen Elizabeth I, created a new garden and park on his manorial estate at Quarrendon on the edge of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire. The result was something exceptional even by the standards of that dynamic age: an artificial landscape suffused with the spirit of the English Renaissance and Reformation.

The scale, complexity and completeness of the remains are, according to leading gardens archaeologist Paul Everson, 'especially outstanding', allowing us, through careful survey and analysis, to explore the mind-set of the political elite of the Elizabethan Age. Despite the legal protection provided to a 'scheduled ancient monument' a few years ago, the remains were under multiple threat. The earthworks were rutted by farm vehicles, dotted with feeding troughs and silage dumps, and damaged by tree-throw and burrowing animals. The site was affected by fly-tipping and the theft of remaining masonry from its ruined medieval church. But the greatest danger was posed by urban expansion.

Aylesbury is a booming London-commuter town, and there were plans for major urban expansion north of the River Thames. The Berryfields area west of the site and the Weedon Hill area east of it were both designated 'major development areas', and a new 'western link road' was planned to join the two proposed housing schemes. The Tudor courtier's vision was about to be engulfed by 21st century urban sprawl.

Courtier, soldier, poet Henry Lee (1533-1611) had inherited his father's estates in 1550, had been knighted in 1553 during the ceremonies surrounding the coronation of Queen Mary I, and had then married the daughter of one of Mary's privy councillors. Later, under Elizabeth (1558-1603), he served as MP for Buckinghamshire, held a number of senior royal offices, and finally became a Knight of the Garter in 1597. His greatest distinction was to be the queen's champion for over 30 years, and they have devised in 1570 the annual Accession Day tournaments held in Whitehall every 17 November.

Courtier, soldier, and poet, Henry Lee was a typical figure of the Elizabethan elite: descended from 15th century Warwickshire merchant graziers, he had risen to the top through loyal service to the Tudor dynasty. Educated, cultured, modern in outlook, a supporter of the 'new' in religion, his aim was to turn Quarrendon into a model country residence that reflected his rank, wealth and taste, and also provided a proper setting for entertainments to delight and divert a queen (though whether Elizabeth actually visited, as planned in 1592, is uncertain).

Like many others at the time, the Quarrendon estate was transformed during the 16th century by enclosure, depopulation, and the introduction of sheep. A comprehensive earthwork survey carried out by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (now English Heritage) in 1989-1990 revealed two deserted medieval settlements at either end of the site, some 800m apart – 'Quarrendon I' to the east, 'Quarrendon II' to the west. Whether these are technically 'DMVs' (deserted medieval villages) is open to question, as both seem to have consisted only of 'small groups of farmsteads loosely organised around irregular greens'; they might more accurately be described as hamlets or 'ends' in a pattern of settlement characteristic of adjacent parishes in the Vale of Aylesbury.

A landscaped garden and park

By contrast, Henry Lee's late 16th century garden and park formed a designed layout in a landscape setting with carefully planned vistas. An existing medieval church and moated manor house were linked and

incorporated into elaborate formal gardens. These included a water garden with ponds and islands. Broad terraces two metres high and 10-12m across formed the walkways, and these were surrounded by water-filled canals. A diagonal subsidiary channel probably served a water-mill, providing a central focus for the garden combining utility with ornament. There were also almshouses built immediately south of the church and integrated into the formal garden design. The almshouses seem to have been of a standard measurement (60m) that is replicated by the terraces in a ratio of 1:2:3. 'An interest in geometric form and symbolic ratios appears to permeate this construction,' comments Paul Everson.

'Behind it may lie an interest in the golden mean, both as a geometric concept in itself and as a principle understood in contemporary philosophical thought to organise and regulate the universe.' Henry Lee is known to have been interested in such speculations.

Major works of hydraulic engineering made it all possible, with water captured and brought to the garden in a 1.5km long channel from the tributary stream to the north and the rising ground to the east. The effect was to transform the valley bottom as a whole, draining it of excess water and converting it into rich meadow-land.

In contrast with the formal gardens west of the mansion, there was parkland on the rising ground to the east, including an extensive rabbit warren formed of pillow-mounds, the earliest of which formed a line on the skyline, much like prehistoric barrows. 'There is a clear contrast,' explains Everson, 'between the controlled, man-made formal gardens lying entirely to the west of the moated residence and the ostensibly 'natural' designed landscape lying to the east of the house, which comprises a large open space with its skyline perhaps defined by thick hedges except where it is occupied by the warren.' The western and eastern facades of the mansion may, he suggests, have been designed to replicate this contrast between 'two worlds'.

The language of landscape

Reading the symbolism successfully depends largely on walking the landscape and imagining the contemporary vistas at different points. A visitor in 1600 would have approached from the main road to the west. He would have crossed the north-south tributary of the Thame on a stone bridge: here was a key vantage-point. Ahead he would have seen the west end of the church, the new almshouses, the formal gardens to the right, the great house straight ahead, and the warren on the skyline beyond. Looking up and down stream he would have seen sheep and cattle grazing the rich pasture that was the source of Henry Lee's wealth. A more thoughtful visitor might reflect that these 'leas' (meadows) were a pun on the family name, and that the mill in the formal garden and the warren on the hillside together represented the estate name, Quarrendon, meaning 'mill hill'.

Formality, symmetry and geometry are features of design often symbolic of reason, order and civilisation. They had this significance in the Renaissance. The obvious contrast is with 'wild' nature. But Paul Everson has detected something more: a possible reference to the conflict between Protestant and Catholic, 'new' and 'old', in the layout of Quarrendon's garden and park. Why were the almshouses included in the formal garden design? The Elizabethan elite, like their medieval forebears, still measured status through the number of a man's dependants, and, though a tatty hamlet would have been out-of-place in the new conception, a standard-length terrace of new almshouses planned as part of the overall design was a tactful reminder that Henry Lee was a lord as well as a landowner. The building of almshouses was also an increasingly fashionable way of displaying Protestant charity.

Again, the contrast, is with the warren. Is the 'wild', rabbit-infested park east of the house intended as a reminder of Sir Henry's role as Lieutenant and Ranger of the royal manor of Woodstock, where he was responsible to the queen for the management of park and game? Perhaps. However, as Everson explains, in

Elizabethan times the creation of a rabbit warren as a garden feature sometimes signified adherence to the old religion. Anne Lee, Henry's wife, the mistress of Quarrendon, was a Catholic. 'It would be an intriguing conjunction evidenced in the field archaeology if one end of the designed layout at Quarrendon encapsulated symbolism of the Old Faith – in the warren – while the other had a Protestant stamp – in the formal gardens and almshouses. It would be much in the temper of the age. Such a conjunction might both embody the spirit of the Elizabethan settlement and play as a contrast between the old and the new in religious terms.'

Saving Quarrendon

For Buckinghamshire County Archaeologist Sandy Kidd, the messages incorporated in the late 16th century Quarrendon landscape make the whole a vital part of Aylesbury's local heritage. Mansion, garden and park combined to communicate ideas about elite status, aesthetic taste, piety and generosity, control over nature, and agricultural wealth. To appreciate this, one needs to be able to walk across this landscape, imagine what has been lost, and 'read' it as a cultured Elizabethan might have done. Fortunately, he and his colleagues have been able to steer a way through the multiple threats facing the site.

'A planned network of multifunctional green-spaces and inter-connected links which is designed, developed and managed to meet environmental, social and economic needs of communities across the Sub Region': that, in the glutinous prose of local government, is what is needed, according to Planning Sustainable Communities, a green infrastructure guide for Milton Keynes and the South Midlands. 'It is set within, and contributes to, a high quality natural and built environment and is required to enhance the quality of life for present and future residents and visitors, and to deliver 'liveability [sic] for sustainable communities.'

Buckinghamshire County Council was roused in defence of Quarrendon by increasing public awareness resulting from a campaign led by the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society. It was clear the site offered a unique opportunity to provide adequate green space around Aylesbury. So the County Council has now decided to establish a new trust to manage the site both to conserve it and to provide a public amenity. Funding is being sought for a comprehensive programme of proposed management for the site, including continued grazing, protection of the church ruins, restoration of the moat, protection of the wider setting, management of access, enhancement of wildlife, and public information.

The plans for the Berryfields and Weedon Hill housing schemes and the associated road were altered. To the west, a 100m 'buffer' zone will limit the proximity of new housing to the site. To the east, new housing will stop short of the skyline and building heights will be controlled to protect the critically important views from the site of the moated mansion up to the pillow mounds. And the western link road has been diverted northwards, ensuring that the sights and sounds of 21st century traffic will not be allowed to destroy the rural tranquillity of the Elizabethan landscape.

Protected by this 'safeguarding zone', the exceptionally preserved garden earthworks at Quarrendon, testimony to the dynamism, optimism and avant-garde culture of the Elizabethan elite, have been saved as a heritage-rich green space for future generations of Aylesbury residents.
