

SANHS Low Ham History Day

David Victor, a SANHS historian, introduced the day with a tale of financial madness brought on by one John Stawell who attempted to build a palatial country house at Low Ham, with a façade 400 feet long, having demolished two fine country houses in so doing and a great inheritance. The building began in 1689 was unfinished: the profligate baron, who had come into great wealth with 20 manors in his estate including Somerton, Aller and lands in West Somerset, unfortunately died aged 23 in 1692. He left large debts (to be paid off by Act of Parliament) and a wife who proceeded to dispose of his assets, large and small.

The story as told by David was a lot more complicated and involved the amassing of the estates in the first place by Sir Edward Hext, confiscation after the Civil War and then restitution at the Restoration together with the creation of a barony for his son Ralph Stawell by the grateful monarch. Quite a tale! The triumphal arched gateway which stands just off Sparkford High Street came from Low Ham Manor but nothing now remains of the grand house itself. Julian Orbach in his reworked Pevsner¹, reports that John Stawell spent more on the house than was spent on Calke Abbey or Buckingham House in London. Even decades later, when it was described as 'vast piles of a stately ruin', the painted ceilings were still in evidence.

This snapshot of the fortunes of Low Ham in the seventeenth century was very germane to a discussion presented by Rob Wilson-North from Exmoor National Park, who had studied the gardens at Low Ham as a student and later on for the RCHM². No descriptions or sketches or maps survive of the gardens which were partly Hext and partly Stawell, although Jacob Bobart the younger wrote a letter at some point setting out how the gardens should be laid out.



The garden earthworks at Low Ham. To the right can be seen the church. ©M. Aston

All that survives are the earthworks (see above) which present a curious mix-up. The gardens run downhill and the church (of which more later) can be seen at the northern end, but the locations of the great house and the former substantial family properties remain undocumented. The earthworks comprise a series of terraces which can be seen in the centre of the image and a massive 12 foot wall runs down the eastern side.

Further to the east are less well-defined terraces set at an angle, while to the west are more terraces which are only half dug out so their purpose isn't very clear – were they excavated as quarries or just unfinished like so much else ascribed to John Stawell? The terraces to the east are puzzling as they make the gardens into a wedge design, which looks unbalanced. However, similar slightly trapezoid shapes can be found elsewhere (Gamlingay in Cambridgeshire, Cerne Abbas in Dorset) so that in itself isn't a mystery. In any case, Rob emphasised that the whole setting just does not make sense without knowing how the great house commanded the prospect. At the bottom of the slope lies the church which as a quite modest affair was hardly going to represent the focus of a grand garden design.

Julian Orbach – architectural historian and vice-president of SANHS – introduced the church at Low Ham. For Julian, the setting of the church at Low Ham is just one of its anomalies. For those unfamiliar with the church, it sits in a field on its own without the trappings of a village church (Low Ham is not a parish) and without a dedication.

Edward Hext bought the Low Ham estate in 1588 and died in 1623 and was buried in the church which indicates the church was finished by then. While the church is Somerset perpendicular in style and so relates nicely to being built in the late sixteenth century, the period of construction is unclear as there are many oddities featured in the building – the tracery in the Gothic windows for instance, the arched mouldings and carved inscriptions inside the church as well as dates of consecration put it firmly later in the seventeenth century. Julian went more strongly for the earlier dates but clearly it was a work in progress for some considerable time. For a more considered description of the church, it is worth looking at Julian's work on Somerset.^{1 op cit}



A review in the Church Times from 2008 of a book by Annabel Ricketts casts a different light. Her study on English country house chapels outlined in meticulous detail how and why the aristocracy and gentry of the 17th-century provided their houses with places of worship after the upheavals of the Reformation. W. Gibson in 1997 said that 'chaplains, like libraries and chapels . . . were part of the mental landscape of the landowning élite'. Thus they were more architectural adjuncts to a great house than a necessity.³

Low Ham church ©Andrew Faulkner

However, in Roman times, the bath house was a statement of having it all perhaps..so moving backwards, we now arrive at the Roman villa site. Roger Leach (Southampton University) gave a summary of the historiography of the excavations carried out at fourth century Low Ham villa close by. The villa is best known for the mosaic which depicts scenes from Virgil's *Aeneid* and can be seen in all its glory at the museum in Taunton. He showed a great selection of photographs from the late 40s and early 50s excavations. The site was as clean as a whistle with not a trowel or bucket in sight. He also showed drawings of the excavation from 1949 and discussed the nature of the building which was a wealthy courtyard villa.



Image showing the pilae which supported the hypocaust floor at Low Ham, 1940s excavation.

The early excavations focussed on the bath house and the west wing of the villa. A lot of fourth century pottery was found, particularly BB1 black burnished ware. The key figures were Herbert Cook who discovered the site, Lionel Waldron who was involved with the excavations and HSL Dewar and Raleigh Radford who directed them. This link is from Pathe News https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYb_sSJuiz0 and shows the excitement at the discovery of the mosaic.

Much of what Roger included will form part of the final Historic England (HE) report on Low Ham which will also take account of the recent work. In 2018 David Roberts from Historic England led an excavation which attempted to characterise some additional enclosures and buildings newly revealed by magnetometry. He swiftly ran through what the three excavated trenches had revealed (not much) and Nicola Hembrey, also from HE, showed a few slides of finds – many iron nails, a lovely Mesolithic flint and small bits of jewellery. It seems that the HE investigation was prompted not so much by the importance of the site, but by a window of opportunity offered when another excavation fell through. The aims were to understand other parts of the villa site (HE did not excavate the villa itself), check out a possible cemetery (it wasn't) and to provide training for different groups of workers. TR1 had a series of aligned ditches and a possible grain dryer which seemed to have recycled stones from the villa. TR2 was a long wall attached to the end of the villa. Many tesserae were found, but none in situ. This trench had a considerable burnt area and seems to have had a life as a small industrial site. TR3 had three roundhouses with some anomalous features and several post holes. That was pretty much it for the recent work!

Finally I should mention Steve Parker who gave an absorbing talk about Somerset wildlife on the Levels.

MC

- 1 *The Buildings of England. Somerset South and West.* Julian Orbach and Nikolaus Pevsner. Yale University Press London 2014.
- 2 Somerset parks and gardens after the Middle Ages: the archaeology of the formal garden, c 1540 – 1730 by James Bond. See https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=2ahUKEwiN6Mzho8HIAhUoQUEAHVA4AcAQFjACegQIBBAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.somersetheritage.org.uk%2Fdownloads%2Fpublications%2F150years%2FHES_150_Years_Chapter_17.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3gJzk1jLC0divp-dMgFkMp
- 3 <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2008/25-april/books-arts/book-reviews/the-pious-equivalent-of-an-indoor-swimming-pool>