

THE BUILDING OF STANMER HOUSE AND THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARK c. 1720 TO 1750

by *Sue Farrant, B.A., Ph.D.*

Today Stanmer House is situated on the chalk downland just on the northern boundary of modern Brighton although when the present house was built, Brighton was a small seafaring town over four miles to the south.¹ Although Stanmer is familiar to many people, little has been published about the erection of the house or the early development of the Park.

By 1721 when the building of the present Stanmer House began, only a few country houses had been rebuilt in the new Palladian style. The architect was Nicolas Dubois, a Frenchman who made a major contribution to the adoption of the new style in Britain when he translated Palladio's most important book into English in 1715.² Although he was not a mason by training, in 1719, Dubois was appointed to the important office of Master Mason in the Office of Works which maintained royal establishments. His appointment was apparently a consequence of the patronage of powerful politicians who also helped into government posts other architects who are now better known than Dubois for their Palladian style buildings. Dubois was very involved as a member of the Board which ran the Office of Works, and Stanmer Park is one of his few ventures for private patrons.³

Due to his employment, Dubois was probably very aware of the new attitude towards landscaping which was that parks should use the best features of the landscape and enhance them by carefully placed clumps of trees, woods and areas of water. Advocates of this style considered it to be cheaper to maintain than the formal garden but, in addition, suggested that it was aesthetically a more appropriate setting for a Palladian style house. An advantage of parks was that they gave views across boundaries. Hedges were not favoured, the rural landscape around the country house was considered to have enough of these as the consequence of enclosure and the increasingly ordered and careful management of the British 'countryside'. The park was to be a contrast with the rural surroundings and so boundaries within the view of the house were frequently indicated by ditches called ha-has and hidden by trees. The lack of visible boundaries and careful tree planting in the distance made the park look larger and gave the impression that more land was devoted to it.⁴ At Stanmer, clumps of trees were planted in the distance to the front of the house (on the eastern side).

In order to describe how the estate became the property of the Pelhams, it is necessary to begin the story just over a decade before they bought it. In 1700, Peter Gott, a successful ironmaster from Lamberhurst (in Kent), purchased the estate from Bridget Michelbourne and Sibella Martin, her married sister, who were the daughters and heiresses of Edward Michelbourne. For £8,000 he acquired the lordship of the Manor of Stanmer and the property which belonged to it.⁵

Peter Gott and his family occupied the house which formerly stood on the site of the present house. In 1712, shortly after his death, the property had to be sold. The house was very comfortably and richly furnished; an inventory of 'Mr. Gott's indoor goods' had a total value of just

over £1,200. Some of the furnishings are described here, although the original inventory is more detailed. In the Great Stair Case and Hall there were 47 Indian Prints, great and small, an eight day clock in a flower case, an eight leaved Indian screen, in addition to chairs, tables and other furnishings. In the hall, and in the living rooms mentioned below, there were fireplaces in which stood firebacks and fire dogs. The Dining Room windows were graced by two pairs of chequered window curtains with vallances and pulleys.

In addition to stools and easy chairs, there was a chess set and a writing desk. The most attractive room was probably the Little Parlour in which there were ten walnut chairs covered with crimson velvet, window curtains trimmed with a scarlet fringe, an Indian tea table and tea stand, eight saucers and five cups of scalloped china and three chocolate cups. There was a with-drawing room with windows that were framed by 'florencia silk' curtains, and embellished by a large pier glass with an 'Earched Topp'. The Great Parlour had three half length portraits in gilt frames hanging on the walls. That the best rooms were so well furnished and numerous implies that the house was quite large. No evidence of its appearance or size has been discovered.

Henry Pelham of Lewes purchased the estate from Peter Gott's son Samuel in 1712-13 for £7,500 and resided in the house until his death in 1721. The estate passed to his eldest son, Henry, and soon after, in July 1721, he decided to reside there.⁶ For a member of the Pelham family, influential in Sussex affairs, Stanmer was a good location for a country seat. It was near to Lewes, which was the principal administrative and social centre for eastern Sussex. From Stanmer Henry could travel quite easily to reach the Downland and scarp foot country estates of influential acquaintances such as the Morleys at Glynde, the Gages at Firle, the Campions at Danny and the Stapleys at Patcham. Travel to London, via Lewes and East Grinstead, was relatively easy. From Stanmer, the family could reach their estates on the Downs and in the Weald quite easily, for the greater part of the Wealden estate of this branch of the Pelhams in the early eighteenth century lay to the north of Stanmer.

By August 1722, Henry had chosen Dubois as his architect. Dubois acted as architect and overseer for the house, its outbuildings and the surrounding gardens and landscaping; he received six per cent of the total cost and his travelling expenses. Some of Dubois' correspondence and the final building account for the house survived, and from this evidence it is possible to outline the building chronology of the house.⁷

The house and grounds closest to it appear to have been the main responsibility of Dubois. For £14,200 not only was the house built and the interior decorated, but outhouses, a coachhouse, stables, a forge, a coalstore, a pig house, a pigeon house, and a new farmhouse were built. The gardens, kitchen garden, ponds, and a bowling green were also laid out and a horse gin erected over the well. The demolition of a substantial part of the old house and at least some of its outbuildings was also done, although some of the outbuildings (such as part of the stables) were retained and repaired.⁸

Not all of the house which Dubois designed and built has survived. The house that we see today is L-shaped, with the main front facing north-east, and the garden front facing south-east. There was another substantial wing on the north-west side of the house, which contained all of the service rooms and which was linked to the dining room in the garden front by a colonnade. The service wing was severely damaged during the second world war and was demolished, along with the colonnade when Brighton Corporation purchased the house. The main front was simpler, without the present porch which was built around 1800, and the right hand bay which was built in the 1860s.⁹ The landscaping around the house has been altered too, but it is likely that Dubois'

work was subsequently amended rather than replaced, as the history of the house in its first 30 or so years will show.

The choice of building materials had to be approved by Henry Pelham, who naturally did not wish to be overcharged or allow existing resources to be wasted. Some of the material from the old buildings was re-used, but Dubois and Henry Pelham agreed that most of the building work should be with bricks.¹⁰ Most of these were burnt in Brighton and were made from clay from the vicinity of the modern Western Road, using coal from ships which beached at Brighton. Other bricks and tiles were purchased from works in Ringmer, Chailey and Barcombe. Boulders were purchased from collectors who worked on Brighton beach. The main front and the garden front were faced with sandstone salvaged from a demolished house called Kenwards which Pelham owned in Lindfield. The timber which was locally available was described by Dubois as being too short for most of his requirements and unfit for girders, and so he purchased yellow fir in London and had it delivered via Shoreham. Wood for scaffolding was bought in the Weald. Lime was burnt on the site using chalk from quarries nearby and sand was carted from Brighton beach.¹¹

Dubois did not reside at Stanmer as he had work to do elsewhere. He visited periodically in order to supervise and schedule the work. As usual there was a clerk of the works, who received a salary of £40 per annum. A 'measurer' (quantity surveyor) attended when required and received a guinea a day for 60 days' attendance. Alfred Morris of Lewes was the builder and most of the workforce was local. Higher quality work and materials were acquired from London, where Dubois probably knew people whom he preferred to use. A plasterer who worked on the interior, and the blacksmith who made the gates for the terrace were from London. Wainscotting and a chimney piece in Torbay stone were also acquired from the capital.¹²

By mid-November 1722, Dubois had expected the foundations to be completed, before the frosts could damage them. However, Morris was behind schedule, his excuse being a shortage of lime, which the clerk of the works claimed had lasted only a week. Dubois complained to Henry Pelham and asked for Morris to be sacked because he was trying to complete work elsewhere when he should be working at Stanmer. In addition, the foundation work was poor, and it had not been covered with straw to protect it against the frost. Dubois' relationships with some of the workmen were not happy, they called him 'the French son of a bitch'.¹³

Dubois' priority was to complete the house, in October 1723 the walls were up and the sandstone facing had been completed, but landscaping had begun.¹⁴

In March 1724 Henry was deciding on how to decorate the interior. He would not furnish his library after the fashion of an acquaintance who had walked into a London bookshop and on noticing that it happened to have a room of the same dimensions as his new library, purchased the contents. He would buy only what he considered to be useful for his library. Henry's servants were sent to occupy part of the house in September 1724 as he had furnished some of it and was moving in. He had two 'smoking' rooms; one was for use in the summer and the other for during the winter.¹⁵

Henry died in June 1725. In the previous September he had visited the well-known hot springs at Bristol for his health because he had a bad cough. He was a bachelor, and Thomas his youngest brother inherited the estate. Their middle brother John had already died unmarried. All activities on the house and estate were stopped unless they were vital and Dubois was told to await the arrival of Thomas from Constantinople. The living accommodation in the house was almost finished but the great staircase had not been erected in the hall. Thus the greater part of the house and the original interior was completed by Henry Pelham.¹⁶

On his arrival at Stanmer, Thomas Pelham ordered that work should continue, but it is not possible to judge from the accounts or the surviving correspondence whether Thomas ordered any changes to Henry's plans, and Dubois continued to supervise the work. While progress on the environs continued, Thomas began to live the life of the owner of a country estate. In 1726 he stocked the wine cellar from suppliers in London and used his business connections in Turkey in order to acquire some exotic plants and trees for his gardens and kitchen garden. Messrs Chadwick and Toole of Smyrna successfully acquired specimens for his kitchen garden, although subsequent consignments died en route.¹⁷

Meanwhile work on the outbuildings had progressed considerably and the horse gin was to be installed. The horse gin was referred to as the engine and will be so here. It was described in the accounts as 'one engine that forces three tons of water an hour, by one horse, out of a well 230 feet deep into a cistern or reservoir erected 17 feet above the mouth of the well', was installed by Mr. Foukes, an engine maker, and was apparently built at his works in London, where the elm pipes were also drilled. Then all the parts, which weighed between six and seven tons, were shipped to Shoreham. Transport was expensive and as Thomas Pelham agreed to provide his waggons for the journey from Shoreham, Foukes and Dubois promised to deduct the cost of land carriage from the total cost of the engine (of about £600).

Once it had arrived at Stanmer, Foukes and his men required between 10 and 12 days' labour to install it. Mr. Foukes, said Dubois, would take great care with the work because its success was very important to his reputation. Thomas was asked to provide 'dyet' for Foukes and his principal as was customary when the engine maker worked at a gentleman's house, and Dubois hoped that Foukes would be allowed to dine with the head servant. The other workmen were expected to shift for themselves.¹⁸

While arranging for the installation of the engine in 1726, Dubois was still planning some of the landscaping. He sent Thomas two designs: for 'Her Grace's Hermitage and Pools', and for the area round the church and churchyard. The church was mainly 14th century and had a broach spire (it was replaced by the present church in 1838). The projected design for the surrounds of the church showed the area as it was and as Dubois thought it should be. He complained to Pelham that the incumbent was trying to thwart his plan by refusing to allow this churchyard wall to be re-aligned as Dubois envisaged. The architect said that the plan would not result in any loss of land as it was an adjustment of the boundary so that what was taken at one place was given back at another. The incumbent refused, remarking that one foot of consecrated ground was worth a mile of unconsecrated. The alteration would, claimed Dubois, give a 'grandsom walk' 15 foot wide from the church yard wall to the first slope of a canal (lake) which he wished to include in the plan.¹⁹

In November 1726 the engine arrived at Shoreham on the 'Matthew'. Dubois went to Stanmer to inspect the well, which Pelham had complained about, describing it as poorly built. Foukes probably accompanied him for the engine was installed and working in February 1727 when the steward complained to Thomas that some of the pipes leaked and the pumping was not as powerful as it had been. By August 1727 it had been replaced with another one by Foukes.²⁰

In 1730 the rebuilding and landscaping as planned by Henry and completed by Thomas was almost finished. In February the ponds and roads were being completed and what may well have been the last bill from Dubois was received. The correspondence suggests that subsequent work during Thomas' lifetime was for maintenance of the gardens and house, although work on the park may have continued.²¹

When in 1737 Thomas Pelham died, his son, who was also called Thomas, was a minor. The estate was cared for by guardians until he came of age in 1748 and returned from his tour abroad in 1750. Correspondence between the steward and James Pelham, a guardian between 1745 and 1750, has survived. It suggests that the park was being laid out during Thomas' minority and that the guardians were conscientious in their care of the grounds. When Thomas II was expected home in the summer of 1749, Streetre was anxious that the house should be prepared. He said that a lot of painting indoors was required in the 'common part' and the windows, shutters and frames in the best part. He noted that the billiards room had not been repainted since it was wainscotted. Thomas still had not appeared in the following spring when Streetre asked James Pelham whether the house 'below stairs' should be whitewashed. Thomas was certainly due home in October 1750 when Streetre reported that Sir Ferdinand Poole had hinted that the gravel on the roads which was heaped up into ridges should be flattened, and asked whether he should put up the hangings.²²

Thomas Pelham II was born in 1728 and lived until 1805. He was made the First Earl of Chichester in 1801, not long before he died. This Thomas was responsible for the later eighteenth century decoration of several of the main rooms. During his lifetime the plans of his uncle, father and Dubois for the landscaping must have matured and he completed the park which we see today. The degree to which he changed the landscaping as planned by his immediate forebears has not been established.

Stanmer House and its surrounding park became the centre of the family's landed estates described in an earlier article in the *Sussex Archaeological Society Newsletter*.²³

References

¹ J. H. & S. P. Farrant, *Aspects of Brighton 1650-1800*, University of Sussex Centre for Continuing Education Occasional Paper No. 8 (1978).

² H. Colvin, *A biographical dictionary of English Architects 1660-1840* (London 1954), pp. 185-186.

³ H. Colvin ed., *The History of the King's Works Vol. V 1660-1782* (London; HMSO 1976), p. 335.

J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830* (Penguin 1970), pp. 318-319.

⁴ N. Fairbrother, *Men and Gardens* (London 1956), pp. 177-210.

For examples see J. & S. Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man* (London 1975), pp. 234-5, 239, which discusses Castle Howard and Stowe.

⁵ Sussex Archaeological Society (hereafter S.A.S.), A317.

⁶ S.A.S., A 397-A 400 deeds of purchase. British Library (hereafter B.L.) Add. MS 33341. B.L. Add. MS 33085, f 50.

⁷ B.L. Add. MS 33085.

Brighton Area Library, photographic copy of the Stanmer House building accounts reference Z 7443: S9 STA DUB.

⁸ Stanmer building accounts, op. cit.

⁹ For a description of the house see A. Oswald: Stanmer, Sussex, the seat of the Earl of Chichester, *Country Life*, 71 (1932), pp. 14-21.

¹⁰ Building accounts, op. cit.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² B.L. Add. MS 33085, ff 59-60.

Building accounts, op. cit.

¹³ B.L. Add. MS 33085, f 351.

¹⁴ Op. cit., ff 69, 78.

¹⁵ Ibid., ff 86, 92-93.

¹⁶ Ibid., ff 94, 138-140 letter, which also notes that the grounds are progressing well.

¹⁷ Ibid., ff 231, 255, 283.

¹⁸ Building accounts, op. cit.

B.L. Add. MS 33085, f 285.

¹⁹ Op. cit.

²⁰ Ibid., ff 287, 321.

²¹ Ibid., ff 387, 430.

²² B.L. Add. MS 33086, ff 467, 38, 39, 116.

²³ Sue Farrant, 'The formation of estates on the Sussex Downs in the eighteenth century', *Sussex Archaeological Society Newsletter* 24 (April 1978), pp. 149-150.