

WILLIAM ROE OF WITHDEAN: THE PURCHASE AND MANAGEMENT OF A SMALL ESTATE ON THE SOUTH DOWNS 1794 TO 1808 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE MODERN LANDSCAPE

by Sue Farrant

In 1794 William Roe, a distinguished civil servant, purchased a small estate at Withdean in Patcham, close to Brighton, Britain's major seaside resort. The new owner planted trees and built a cottage for the family's country home. Roe's estate is of particular interest as one of the few 'suburban' estates established near towns in Sussex, and because Roe's tree-plantations are still important features of the modern landscape.

Between about 1780 and 1830 estates of between 1,000 to 6,000 acres emerged as the normal form of land ownership on the South Downs to the east of the Adur Valley. Such estates were commonly let as farms of between 500 and 1,000 acres but compact estates of up to about 1,800 acres were let as single farms. Even by modern standards, downland farms were large but they were very successful during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, because of the success of the sheep-corn husbandry which was practised upon them. Letting land in large units was very convenient for its owner and there was no shortage of tenants. The land owners were predominately long established Sussex-based gentry, most of whom did not own residences on the downs, their country seats were in the Weald of Sussex, for example at Wiston, Sheffield Park and Eridge. The number of owner-occupiers of land declined and only a few tenacious families managed to retain their farms through the vicissitudes of this period and of these, one or two were over 1,000 acres, for example the Paines' farm in Patcham.¹

By 1830 the local gentry had enlarged their downland estates at the expense of the owner-farmers, whose attempts to enlarge their farms during this period frequently resulted in the loss of the entire holding when prices of the downland's main produce, sheep and corn, fell. Nevertheless, owner-occupiers competed against the gentry for smaller holdings of up to about 300 acres which lay inter-mixed with, or adjacent to, their own land and the consequence of this competition was to increase the purchase cost of the smaller acreages.

The gentry and local farmers faced little competition from other prospective purchasers. Only a very small number of the wealthier towns-folk in Lewes and Brighton could afford to develop downland estates and only one or two chose to do so, for example the Hurllys of Lewes who built up their holding in the parishes of Kingston and Iford nearby.

The rapid growth of Brighton as a seaside resort from about 1750 to the mid-1820s probably diverted investment by prosperous traders and professional people in both Brighton and Lewes away from agricultural land into urban development. The attractions of investing in urban development were that profitable participation was possible with less capital than was required to develop a viable downland estate, investment could be spread over a longer time-span and range of assets and, the element of risk inherent in urban development was offset by not having the higher costs associated with managing agricultural land to bear. Townsfolk who

inherited farmland on the downs sold it if the conditions of the legacy permitted, and thus provided another source of land for the gentry and farmers. The capital could be invested in the flourishing local towns, possibly directly into the beneficiaries' own businesses.²

Another group of potential investors in downland estates consisted of the increasing number of wealthy visitors who frequented Brighton, many of whom came from London and visited the town fairly frequently. Although some became familiar with the region, investment by visitors was principally in housing development in Brighton and there is no evidence that the price of farmland was directly influenced by the prospect of investments in downland estates by them. Only one Londoner eventually purchased an estate near Brighton in the later eighteenth century: William Roe.

As the average size of estates and farms rose on the downs in the later 1700s, so the number of prospective purchasers was reduced because of the initial purchase cost and subsequent commitment to investing in the holding. Sales of farms by owner-occupiers occurred throughout the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the purchasers were predominately gentry who owned adjacent or intermixed land and who purchased the entire holding. The gentry's estates tended to survive intact because of their size and the availability of other resources such as rent from estates elsewhere to expend, should rents from the downland drop due to bad harvests. Arrangements for inheritance, such as entail, also helped them to survive intact through periods of inept management or indebtedness. These factors combined with the prosperity of the region especially during the Napoleonic wars to make sales of estates infrequent. When they were sold, their size could result in sub-division and absorption by surrounding estates or offer an opportunity for people who wished to purchase a downland estate. The process of assimilation by established estates of owner-occupied farms and land let on lease by small-scale owners had, by the 1790s reduced most of the areas between estates to interstices which were too small for new estates to develop in them: hence purchasing all or a major part of an existing estate offered the only alternative for prospective estate owners.³

In 1793 the Western family's large downland estate which the family had inherited in the early 1700s and which lay to the north and the west of Brighton was auctioned. The family's main estates lay around Rivenhall in Essex. Due to its extensiveness the Sussex land was divided into three lots. Lot 1 included the Lordship of the Manor of Preston and a 900 acre freehold farm, which included a substantial part of Preston parish. The second lot consisted of land on the western side of the town of Brighton (within the parish boundary) which was advertised as potential building land. Lot 3 was Withdean, in Patcham parish, and consisted of the Lordship of the Manor of Withdean Cayliffe with a farmhouse and 354 acres, 555 acres of tithe free free-hold land and 286 acres of copyhold; in total over 1,100 acres (Table I). The total Western estate was approximately 2,500 acres.⁴

There were several prospective purchasers: two members of the local gentry owned land adjacent to parts of the Westerns' estate, Thomas Kemp of Coneyborough who owned land in Brighton, and Lord Abergavenny who owned parts of Patcham, East Blatchington and Rottingdean. Other gentry had estates close by, including the Pelhams of Stanmer. Two owner-occupied farms bounded directly onto the Western estate and belonged to Thomas Paine and Nathaniel Webb, both of Patcham. However, the Westerns' auction was inauspiciously timed because two local banks, at Brighton and Lewes, had stopped payment and this affected the finances of many of the gentry. Why the sale was still conducted is not known, but it must be assumed that the need to sell was urgent as land in Suffolk was sold at the same time and an Act of Parliament was secured in order to break the entailed inheritances.⁵ The interests of the local

gentry, at a time of financial difficulties, was probably reduced by the size of the lots and their own policies at that time. Thomas Kemp's interest was confined to the Western land in Brighton parish which was intermixed with his own. Lord Abergavenny was actively developing his other south down estates in the Ouse Valley to the east of Brighton. None of the lots were sold at the auction. Kemp purchased Lot 2, the Brighton land in 1794-1795 and the poor timing of the sale gave opportunities to people who belonged to two groups who, by the 1790s normally had no opportunity to acquire downland estates: tenant-farmers and upper middle-class professional or tradesmen. Thomas Stanford, the very prosperous tenant of the Western's farm in Preston, managed to buy Lot 1, the manor and the land in Preston in 1794. William Roe, a Commissioner of Public Accounts in the Civil Service in London who had long wished to purchase an estate near Brighton, a resort which he visited frequently with his family, was well pleased with paying £13,000 for Lot 3, the Withdean estate, in 1794. When Roe bought Withdean there was no gentleman's residence—Preston manor house was sold to Thomas Stanford.⁶

Roe's estate is of particular interest because he kept a memorandum book which recorded aspects of his management of it, including the process of purchase and because he built a "cottage" for himself on the estate at Withdean, so following a fashion which apparently began in the later eighteenth century when rings of small 'suburban' estates such as Roe's were established around large towns. These estates were let to farmers but small houses were built on them to be used as country retreats by their owners. Roe's cottage is the only example of this fashion around Brighton.⁷ Few personal records such as correspondence and memorandums relevant to the study of downland estate management during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries survive. This period is of special interest because the estates are in the final stages of completion and by 1830 most of them like Roe's have reached their maximum size as recorded on the tithe maps. From 1830 most of them remain unchanged in extent or ownership until they were broken up and sold from c. 1900. The investment decisions of estate owners between c. 1770 to 1830 are therefore very significant. The layout of the Roe and the Stanford estates onto which Brighton overflowed in the nineteenth century were finally determined by this particular sale and the subsequent purchases by Stanford and Roe. Their decisions ultimately influenced the location and type of urban development from the 1840s.

Roe's memorandum offers insights into six aspects of the purchase and management of a small estate. First the reasons for purchase and the financial arrangements. Second, the process of purchase, including proving the title, which he describes in detail. Third, how a rentier establishes the potential of a new estate and the importance of subsequent purchases. Fourth, the use and role of local attorneys and estate managers. Fifth, the attitudes to and influence of, a rentier on land use; Roe made a particularly distinctive contribution to the landscape of Withdean by ordering the planting of extensive tree belts, some of which remain. Last, by implication, the influence of architectural fashions upon the owners of small estates near towns when deciding what to build as their own residence.

Roe's first visit to Brighton was in December 1775, when he spent his honeymoon there but the family did not stay there again until September 1779. There was another interlude to September 1785 from when Roe rented houses bi-annually, for about two months from late August or early September. From 1794 when he purchased the Withdean estate the family's visits were more frequent. In addition to the family holidays, Roe also made trips into Sussex to visit friends and his wife's relatives at Chichester and often included Brighton in his route.⁸

For some time Roe had wished to buy an estate in this area and he thought that the

Western's sale provided a good opportunity. He discussed the prospect with his heir, William, and with his wife. William junior was told that if the estate was purchased it was to become his responsibility if the family was to retain it. Roe attended the auction when the estate was bought in at £12,000 and a few days later he negotiated with the Western family by using Mr. Gilbert, their steward, as his intermediary. Roe offered £12,500 and after protracted negotiations the Westerns agreed to sell for £13,000 including the timber for which they had previously wanted a separate valuation. This bargaining over timber is striking because few areas of the eastern downland had sufficient woodland to be worthy of any negotiation and its survival may help to explain Roe's attraction to the estate and his decision to plant trees.

The Withdean estate was owned as two separate parts by William and Charles Callis Western as shown in Table 1. Roe paid more to C. C. Western for his 556 acres than W. Western received for his 640 acres not because the land was different but because the former's land was freehold and tithe free whereas only 355 acres of W. Western's was freehold and none of his share was tithe free. Tithe and copyhold rights were regarded as encumbrances which reduced the value of land and, in order to free himself from having to pay tithes, in 1797, Roe purchased from Mr Paine of Patcham the right to collect them from the land which he had bought from W. Western (Table 1).

In common with many downland estates in this period, Roe's was still in transition from being a mixture of freehold and copyhold to becoming entirely freehold, and within its bounds there were still fields which he did not own. Roe soon discovered that the two small holdings intermingled within his estate created friction and decided to purchase them (Table 1). Mrs. Roberts laid claim to additional land which she thought was part of her copyhold until Roe disproved the claim. Thomas Scrase disputed with Roe about rights to pasturing sheep on downland which Roe controlled, but on which Scrase had the right to pasture a flock of 60 sheep which arose from his 19 acre small holding. Not until 1808 did Roe manage to purchase Scrase's land and consequently own all of Withdean.

For outlays greater than £1,000 Roe usually used mortgages as in 1803 and 1808 (Table 1) when Hoper and Gilbert, solicitors and land agents in Lewes, found him wealthy local farmers who were willing to lend, such as John Ellman of Glynde. Smaller outgoings were paid from capital or from income. A similar pattern of financial management was employed by other owners of downland estates.

On receiving the title deeds to his freehold and copyhold land, the manor court books for the two manors which he had purchased as part of the estate (Withdean and Withdean Cayliffe) and maps of his estate, in 1794, Roe then had the bounds of his purchase defined on the ground. At this stage Roe, well pleased with the services rendered by Hoper and Gilbert (who were partners) decided to retain Gilbert (who had been the Westerns' local agent) as his own. Gilbert probably assisted Roe from thereon as he seems to have been present at some of the meetings to tread out the bounds in 1794 and 1795. Such a practise was necessary when downland changed hands because large areas of pasture were unfenced. Old farm labourers, farm bailiffs and shepherds were employed to define bounds in the presence of the respective landowners or their official representatives. Missing boundary stones or doles (mounds of earth) were replaced, and within the estate, rights of way were also identified.

Roe did not intend to farm his land but like many new owners of estates he attempted to assess what the existing patterns of land-use were, the standard of husbandry and general upkeep and, whether the rent was too low. This was of particular interest in a period when rents were rising rapidly, but when tenants normally had 14 or 21 year leases rather than 7. When Roe

TABLE 1 William Roe's Withdean Estate: Investment in Land and in Rights 1794-1808

<i>Date of purchase</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Acreage</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Vendor</i>	<i>Price</i>	<i>Mode of purchase</i>	<i>Roe's Rationale</i>
27.5.1794							
Purchase (1)	Lordship of Manor of Withdean Cayliffe and freehold land within it	355-3-1	Lord of the Manor and owner of freehold	Wm Western of Rivenhall Essex			Would like to purchase an estate preferably in Brighton area as visits it frequently
Purchase (2)	Copyhold farm	286-1-7	Copyholder held of Manor of Patcham (Abergavenny)		£5913 fine of admission	£1300 realised from marriage settlement, then admission mortgage for £1300 at 4½	
Purchase (3)	Manor and farm of Withdean or Wighdean (tithe free)	556-3-14	Freehold	Chas Callis Western, Felix Hall, Essex	£113 £7087		
July 1797	Purchase part of right to be lay impropiator of tithes of rectory of Patcham	1196-3-22 in sale	Impropriator of Great Tithe	Mr Paine of Patcham	£1500	6 year mortgage to Paine at 5% p.a. paid off 1803	reduce outlays and simplify management
March 1799	Redeem landtax on Great Tithes (£2-10-0 p.a.)	—			48-13-4½	Cash ?	as above
1802	Cottage garden and two fields	4-3-25	Copyhold of Manor of Patcham	Mrs Roberts	£670 to her, £17 in court fees to steward	Cash ?	towards completing control of area
1803	(a) redeem land tax on 1796 land (£60-4-0 p.a.)	1196-3-22			£2207-6-8	£3000 mortgage at 3% to J. Morris of Ringmer	reduce outlays and simplify management
1808	(b) on late Roberts 12/- Four fields, farmhouse now tenements, yard, garden, land, 60 sheep leases	4-3-25 19-3-24	Freehold	Tho Scrace	£12-13-6 £4500	Cash ? mortgage J. Ellman of Glynd £2000 T. Ellman of Shoreham £2000	as above resolve disputes over 60 sheep leases and finally complete control of hamlet of Withdean
	Total acreage	1223					

purchased Withdean the entire estate of over 1,100 acres was let to William and Thomas Scrase who worked as a partnership and were well known locally as progressive farmers.

In 1801 Roe decided to increase the rent as the lease was due for renewal and the rent was the major income from the estate. After consulting Gilbert, and discussions with other people, Roe decided to offer a seven year lease at £1,100 per annum to the Scrases in the autumn of 1801, but intended to accept £1,000. He clearly took considerable time and trouble over this important decision. After several months of negotiation he leased the farm in 1802 to his friend Grundy who offered £1,200, tithe included. Just after this, William Scrase wrote to offer £1,050 and Roe recorded his regret at losing long established tenants and that he would have preferred to retain them if they had met him at £1,060, noticeably lower than the rent which Grundy offered. Roe's estimate of rent was in line with the expectations of other owners between 1801 and 1812, Thomas Saxby paid the Earl of Abergavenny £1,200 per annum for Northease farm in Rodmell which had 1,034 acres. In 1811 John Ellman's rent for his 1,400 acre farm in Glynde was increased by the Trevors from £689 to £1,200.⁹

To record the extent of the downland which the Scrases had ploughed up to use as additional land, before the incoming tenant took over, and to check the accuracy of the old maps which he already possessed (one of which has survived), in 1801 Roe employed William Figg of Lewes, a well known local surveyor. Figg also produced plans of specified areas in which Roe was interested, probably because he wished to plant more trees.

Some estate owners took an interest in one aspect of agriculture, for example the Earl of Egremont who experimented with livestock breeding at Petworth, and the Earl of Sheffield's sheep breeding activities at Sheffield Park. Usually these owners conducted their experiments on the estate on which they resided. Roe, though not resident at Withdean until 1807 and only resident in Brighton for short periods until then, took a particular interest in tree planting. Between 1794 and 1807 he briefly noted his actions in this memorandum but the detail, such as acreage and specific types, was noted in another volume. Roe offers no explanation for his interest but he seems to have started soon after buying the land. His decision is interesting because this region was noteworthy for its treelessness, except Stanmer Park and smaller scale projects around Glynde House and Glyndebourne in Glynde parish, Patcham Place by Patcham village, Ovingdean Hall in Ovingdean, and, trees surrounding farms and villages. The upper areas of the downs were open pasture but some arable land was fringed by quickset (hawthorn) hedges instead of fences. The apparent survival of rather more trees than was common to downland may have influenced his subsequent actions.

Roe's planting was sufficiently extensive for him to have his own tree nursery by 1802. In 1803 he decided that the work on the preparation of land, planting, maintenance of established and young trees would merit the employment of a gardener full time and so he employed one from Brighton for 75 pence a week with a rent free cottage in Withdean. By then some of the plantations were cut as copse and sold to customers in Brighton (which provided him with a local market). His timber included ash, beech, elm, larch, oak and Scots fir and other 'forest trees'. Although the specimen trees have gone, the plantations are evident on the Patcham tithe map in the 1840s and most of them survived into the later 1800s when they influenced the layout of roads and the setting of houses in the Withdean and Varndean areas of modern Brighton. The modern large scale Ordnance Survey maps still show tree belts where Roe planted or retained them. Unfortunately, it is impossible to identify the pre-1794 tree belts from the surviving evidence, but most of the planting was probably Roe's.

In 1803 Roe decided to have a cottage built at Withdean and this might have been a long

term aim which may help to explain the planting of trees in order to create a picturesque landscape, even though it handicapped farming. As trees were regarded by local farmers as an impediment to their extensive agriculture and reduced the value of downland as farm land, this is worthy of consideration particularly as the income from timber would have been delayed until the trees matured. Roe did not wish to build a mansion, specifically describing the property as a cottage, meaning a small house. Its precise location is not known but it was probably on the eastern side of the London Road on the road frontage of the modern Withdean Park, for in the 1840s a cottage surrounded by trees stood there. The only other dwellings depicted at Withdean had farm buildings with them and were let as farm houses by Mrs. Roe. If Roe followed the advice of the fashionable architectural books then he would have imitated the local building style but possibly added some embellishments, rather like Nash's houses at Blaise Hamlet. As it was used infrequently, a small country retreat was probably as much as the Roes would have wanted or afforded.¹⁰ The family stayed there for the first time in 1807 but still took a house in Brighton during the resort season.

In 1806 the quality of the memorandum deteriorated, probably because Roe had been promoted to chairman of the Board of Customs and was too busy to maintain it properly. He closed it in 1809 noting that he kept notes on his Sussex affairs in a separate book which, if it is discovered, may be a very useful source on estate management and offer more information about his interest in trees and about his 'cottage'. His papers were inherited by the Curwen family and C. Thomas Stanford published a limited edition of the private memorandums for private circulation, the originals are in Preston Manor museum, Brighton. It is unfortunate that no accounts or letters survive which could be used to establish the effect of his commitment to the Withdean estate upon the family's finances and whether his salary from his profession was either invested in the estate or augmented by income from it.

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²S. P. Farrant, *Georgian Brighton 1740-1820* University of Sussex Centre for Continuing Education Occasional Paper 13 (1980), Chap. 4.

³S. P. Farrant, 'Farm formation in eighteenth century Bishopstone', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 114 (1976), 335-6.

⁴*Sussex Weekly Advertiser* 10.6. 1793.

⁵Essex Record Office, D/DWE, T48.

⁶L. F. Salzman Ed, *Victoria History of the County of Sussex*, 7 (1940) 271.

⁷M. S. Briggs *The English farmhouse* (Batsford, 1953) 200-201. J. Summerson *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830* 5th ed. (Penguin 1969) 288-90. J. Loudon *A treatise on farming, improving and managing country residences; and on the choice of situations appropriate to every class of purchaser*. (2 vols 1806 reprint Gregg, 1971) Vol. 1 140-2; Vol 2, 609.

⁸C. Thomas Stanford, *The private memorandums of William Roe of Withdean in the County of Sussex 1775-1809* (Brighton 1928), forms the basis of most of the information about Roe in this article and Table 1 is entirely derived from it.

⁹E.S.R.O., ABER 2/25 T. Saxby, lease 1812. British Parliamentary Papers 1821 (688) 1X, 49-61, S. Farrant, 'John Ellman of Glynde' *Agricultural History Review* 26 (1978) 77-88.

¹⁰E.S.R.O. TDE/46 Patcham Tithe Map and Schedule. Ordnance Survey 6" to 1 mile.