An assessment of a historic garden site at Grotto Wood, Roxford, Hertingfordbury, Hertfordshire

centred on NGR: TL 301 105

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Report to Groundwork Hertfordshire & SQ Environmental

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Grotto Wood, Roxford, Hertingfordbury, is a small wood of about 1.75 hectares (4.32 acres) in the Lea valley in Hertfordshire. It is about 1.5km SW of the village of Hertingfordbury, and contains the substantial earthwork remains of a formal garden of possible late 17th- or 18th-century date. Gravel extraction and waste disposal has taken place to the west of the wood, and this area has since been restored. Extraction, waste disposal and progressive restoration is currently taking place to the NE of the wood. Concern has been expressed over the potential impact of these activities on the historic site in Grotto Wood. This led to an earthwork survey being carried out in 1995 by C K Currie, followed by the presentation of the report for publication in *Hertfordshire Archaeology*. More recently Groundwork Hertfordshire, on behalf of SQ Environmental, have approached the author to make an assessment of the present site that will include management recommendations for the long-term preservation of the site and for its access and presentation to the public. The work was carried out by C K Currie of CKC Archaeology for the client.

The earthworks in Grotto Wood are a fine example of an unusually well-preserved small formal garden, with possible later Rococo elements. Although associated with Roxford manor house, a minor country residence, they could not be seen from the house. They do not appear to have provided significant views or vistas back to the house, either. The principal feature of the gardens seems to have been a grotto at its southern end. This is now marked by a large, but irregular, crescent-shaped mound just beyond the lowest of the three ponds. At the other extreme (north) of the garden is a large formal mount from which excellent views of the garden and the valley of the River Lea could once be obtained.

Two points seem to make this garden unusual, besides the fine state of preservation of the earthworks. These are the distance that it was located from the house, and the late date that it seems to have been admired. Although it is possible the garden was begun in the later 17th century, it was probably created in the early years of the 18th century. However, it does not receive any salutary notices until the second half of the 18th century, when formal gardens were supposedly out of fashion. The site is therefore one of a growing body of formal gardens that may have still been developed and admired at a time when garden historians once considered they would have been despised.

An assessment of a historic garden site at Grotto Wood, Roxford, Hertingfordbury, Hertfordshire (centred on NGR: TL 301 105)

This report has been written based on the format suggested by the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and guidance for archaeological desk-based assessments.* (Birmingham, 1994). The ordering of information follows the guidelines given in this document, although alterations may have been made to fit in with the particular requirements of the work. All archaeological work undertaken by CKC Archaeology is carried out in accordance with the Code of Conduct and other By-laws of the Institute of Field Archaeologists.

1.0 Introduction

Grotto Wood, Roxford, Hertingfordbury, is a small wood of about 1.75 hectares (4.32 acres) in the Lea valley in Hertfordshire. It stands on near the top of a ridge about 200m north of the River Lea, formerly in an open countryside of fields, dispersed farmsteads and small woods. Gravel extraction and waste disposal has taken place to the west of the wood, and this area has since been restored. Extraction, waste disposal and progressive restoration is currently taking place to the NE of the wood, and is mainly shielded from site by screening mounds. The quarry is not immediately apparent when approaching the wood from the south or SE, where the farmland appears to remain largely unaltered.

The wood is about 1.5km SW of the village of Hertingfordbury, and contains the substantial earthwork remains of a formal garden of possible late 17^{th-} or 18^{th-}century date. Concern has been expressed over the impact of the quarrying activities on the historic site in Grotto Wood. This led to an earthwork survey being carried out in 1995 by Currie (1995), followed by the presentation of the report for publication in *Hertfordshire Archaeology* (Currie forthcoming). More recently Groundwork Hertfordshire, on behalf of SQ Environmental, have approached CKC Archaeology to make an assessment of the present site that will include management recommendations for the long-term preservation of the site and for its access and presentation to the public. The work was carried out by C K Currie and Sybil Wade for CKC Archaeology on behalf of the client. This work updates the earlier work by Currie noted above.

2.0 Historical and geological background

2.1 Geology and soils

The site lies towards the northern edge of the London Basin, where the Chalk beds dip gently southwards and disappear first below a thin layer of sandy Reading Beds and then the thicker London Clay beds. Overlying the solid geology are gravel deposits, now eroded so that they remain only on the tops of hills and upper slopes of valleys. The gravels originated as old river terraces of the River Thames whose route lay through here before it was diverted south by ice-sheets. Boulder-clay, mainly derived from Chalk and therefore alkaline, was also deposited across much of the area by the ice-sheets.

The resulting soil, a mixture of alkaline and neutral clays, sand and gravel is potentially excellent - very fertile and well-structured. This should be a near-perfect site for growing crops or ornamentals - a very fertile soil on a gentle south-facing hillside, not as wet as further down in the valley, but probably receiving all the water it needed from springs where gravel/sand met the underlying clay.

2.2 Historical background

An archaeological survey of garden earthworks in Grotto Wood, Roxford, Hertingfordbury, Hertfordshire (NGR: TL 301105) was undertaken in March 1995 by C K Currie of CKC Archaeology (Gardens Archaeology Project). The commissioning body was the Hertfordshire Gardens Trust.

Grotto Wood is about 150m NW of Roxford Farm, centred on NGR TL 301 105. The latter is probably on the site of a sub-manor of Hertingfordbury mentioned in Domesday Book. There are traces of a homestead moat here alongside the River Lea. A study of the surrounding landscape suggests that Hertingfordbury has a history of dispersed settlement (Munby 1977, 109), of which Roxford Farm is the successor of a sub-manor dating back at least to Late Saxon times (Hoskins 1955, 55). This dispersed settlement is characterised by the abundance of place-names nearby ending in 'End' or 'Green'. Grotto Wood stands on the edge of a gravel plateau some 20m above the Lea valley bottom at a height of about 61m AOD at the southern end of the wood, rising to 69.5m in the north-west corner.

The Victoria County History has traced the descent of the manor of Roxford (Christie 1912, 465-6). It appears that this small manor had been divided amongst the three sisters of Robert de Louth in 1484, and was not reunited as a single land unit until it came into the hands of Thomas Fanshawe around 1651. By about 1660 the manor had passed to George Chalncombe. His widow conveyed the property to John Brassey in 1700. The Brassey family continued to hold the manor until 1801, when they sold it to William Baker of Bayfordbury.

Recent research by Mrs Patience Bagenal, who lives nearby, has uncovered previously unknown material about the earthworks in Grotto Wood. Cartographic information suggests that the garden must have been created between 1605 and 1766. In 1605 a map survives which shows the site of Grotto Wood being occupied by a field known as the Moore Meade (Andrews 1916-8, 188). However, by the time of Drury and Andrews' Topographical Map of Hertfordshire of 1766, an elaborate garden in the formal style is shown that corresponds roughly with the shape of the present garden remains (Hertfordshire Publications 1980 reprint, folio 5). Furthermore, Mrs Bagenal has discovered two overlooked contemporary descriptions of the site.

The first of these, by Richard Dick, has been dated by internal references to between 1739 and 1765. He describes the garden at some length, referring to a 'long Gravel Walk', a spiral mount, a series of fishponds, including an Octagon Basin, a cold bath and a grotto, from which the wood took its name. Most of the features that Dick describes are traceable on the ground today, although they are heavily overgrown.

The gardens described by Richard Dick in the 18th century bear a close resemblance to the present earthwork remains. Therefore, it is considered worth quoting this source in full, as it helps to put some substance on the bare outline presently surviving. The spellings and grammar are as in the original document.

Dick states that, 'Third day the 18th. went to Mr Brassee's at Rockford to see the Grotto etc. 1st you go in at the gates. you go up a long Gravel Walk at the end whereof is a leaden statue on a pedestal representing Fame. then you turn of your left and then go up a hill round and round till you come to the top. On each side as you go up their is yew hedges. here and there is seats cut in them. at the Top of the Hill is a fine octagon Summer House, which commands a prospect of the Whole Garden and is richly ornamented with fine Paintings. then you came down the same way you went up. and then you turn of your right and go into a cave made of Flint which is under the Summer House, where is a Table upon which two images stand one representing Death and the other Time. their is two Windows shine into or else it would be totally Dark. then you come out. On your Right hand is an Aviary or place for Doves and on the left an Aviary for small singing and canary birds. then before the cave is a Large oblong Fishpond where you see quantities of Fresh Water Fish. and round the end of the pond is Large pieces of flint to represent small rocks. and 1 piece is very much like a Busto, then beyond this is an Octagon Bason.

on one side is a piece of shell Work, where by Turning a cock a hundred Fountains and more play into the water. in the middle of this Bason is Neptune standing with is [sic] feet on the Head of a Dolphin surrounded with large pieces of Flint to represent rocks. Then you go to the Grotto where you go down a few steps. on each side of you is Walls of Flint. then he unlock an Iron Door where you go ino [sic] he [sic] grotto. the bottom is paved with curious small pebbles from Black Heath in a curious manner and on the great Wall afront the grotto is fine Shells. Two small marble Basons of each side of the Door way and 1 opposite. then you go into the Grotto which is richly ornamented with Shells and coloured Flints, a large Bason in the middle of it and fine marble Seats where you set, then the Gardiner turns a cock and fountains all round from the outside into the inside and 1 over your head into the Bason. then you go down a Few Steps into the Cold Bath paved with Marble and fine Stone and richly Ornamented with Painting. then we came out and went [up] a little hill over the Cold Bath where is a fine bilt Chimney round and like the fire of a Bomb bursting out. the which chimney is for a fire in the Dressing Room. then we came down and went by the side of the Cold Bath, the wall of which is painted to represent a Door and two Windows then we came out, but besides their is Statues, Fountains etc.' (quoted in Bagenal 1994, 16-17).

Another source, is a poem, 'Hertford and its environs', in which the garden is described by Thomas Green. This was written about 1775.

'See Roxford next a place retired
but for its garden much admired
These works of nature and of art
their various beauties do impart.

A moat, a summer house, a cave
An aviary too you have:
Whose various birds you see and hear
Whose melody delights the ear
A bath thats elegant and neat
And for the purpose quite compleat
Adorn'd with paintings well designed
By chosen artists of the kind
But this the grotto far excels
Which is enriched with choicest shells
and ornaments of different kind
To charm the eye and please the mind
And here a curious fountain plays
Which throws the water different ways
Above, below, on every side
In plentious streams both far and wide
Where they disposed to lock you in
they soon could wet you to the skin
By curious art and man's device
They'd do it for you in a trice;
Indeed they never are so rude
Unless a blockhead should intrude. (quoted in Bagenal 1994, 17)

This poem contains a later pencilled note that suggests that the garden was shortly afterwards destroyed. This note states that the garden '... is now a mere wilderness. The moat, summer house and aviary, grotto, fountain and bath destroyed and the material sold to Mr Alderman Kirby'. As Kirby died in 1789, it must be assumed that the garden was destroyed between 1775 and 1789 (Bagenal 1994, 17). Subsequently, the very existence of a garden here seems to have been forgotten. In 1807 a detailed map of William Baker's estate was made (HRO D/EX 629 P1). This shows Grotto Wood as woodland, and fails to record any of the internal features that made up the garden, even the ponds. The only features noted are the gate in the south-east corner and the deep ditch around the southern end of the wood. For some reason, a special effort seems to have been made to show this latter feature. By 1834 the area is referred to as a coppiced wood. Once, there may have been many yews surviving from the earlier garden. In 1859 it is recorded in the Bayfordbury estate records that 'Grotto underwood cut and the principal part of the Yews taken down with other Trees' (Bagenal 1994, 16-17).

No subsequent map shows any sign of the garden, although the Ordnance Survey show the three ponds from the late 19th century (OS maps 25" sheet XXXVI.2; 1880, 1898, and 1923 eds.). The site seems to have been largely forgotten until recently rediscovered by Patience Bagenal, a local member of the Hertfordshire Gardens Trust.

The survey carried out by this author in March 1995 made a scale plan of garden earthworks. These included a mount, three ponds, the site of a reputed grotto, and a raised gravel perimeter walk. The remains appear to be a fine example of an unusual formal

garden with possible later Rococo elements. Although associated with Roxford manor house, a minor country residence, they to do not appear to have been seen from the house. Furthermore, they do not appear to have provided significant views or vistas back to the house. The principal feature of this garden seems to have been a grotto at its southern end. This is now marked by a large, but irregular, crescent-shaped mound just beyond the lowest of the three ponds. At the other extreme (north) of the garden is a large formal mount. Fine views of the garden and the valley of the River Lea would have once been possible from this position.

Two points seem to make this garden unusual, besides the fine state of preservation of the earthworks. These are the distance that it was located from the house, and its apparent late date for a garden containing formal elements. Although it is possible the garden was begun in the later 17th century, it does not receive any salutary notices until between *c.* 1739 and 1775, when formal gardens were supposedly out of fashion. The site is therefore one of a growing body of formal gardens that may have continued their development at a time when garden historians once considered this would not have been the case.

3.0 Strategy

This report has set out:

1. To assess the present condition of Grotto Wood and the features within it. This includes an assessment of both the historical and natural components of the wood.
2. To look at the site in relation to its surrounding landscape.

The work was carried out by making visits to Grotto Wood to assess the present condition of the site and its landscape. This was aided by Sybil Wade, a landscape architect, who has worked with CKC Archaeology on a number of historic designed landscapes. A reappraisal, in the light of the new requirements, was made of the existing historical research undertaken in 1995. Further research was undertaken, including searches of the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) for Hertfordshire plus the National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon, Wiltshire for information that could aid the requirements listed above.

4.0 Site description

4.1 Description of the vegetation within the wood

4.1.1 General

There is a decided area of dilapidation hanging over Grotto Wood. It is unlikely that any active management has been carried out here for some years. In summer, the interior of the wood is heavily overgrown with bramble and stinging nettles, making much of it inaccessible. The nettles are probably a sign of the intensely cultivated soil that once existed here, these plants being lovers of high nitrogen content soils, a characteristic of former cultivated soils. In the 19th century the wood may have comprised an oak standards

and underwood coppice. Only a few of mature oaks survive intact today, although the fallen remains of others litter the wood's interior. There are at least a dozen large fallen trees lying of the floor of the wood in various states of decay. One standing oak on the west side of the wood is much charred, being the result of a fairly recent lightening strike. It is only a matter of time now before this falls on to the floor of the wood.

If the wood was once of oak standards with a coppiced understorey, this has been heavily invaded by elder and sycamore. The later is now probably the most common tree in the wood. There are traces of a former laid hedge around the outside. This is best demonstrated by an ash in the SE corner below the former grotto mound. This tree shows signs of having been part of a laid hedge that has seen many years subsequent growth.

This hedge may have been dominated by elm. There are large quantities of diseased elm suckers on both sides of the ditch surrounding the wood. Those on the outside of the ditch are clearly recent suckerings, although some of the elm on the inside shows greater age, despite its poor condition from disease. The former hedge line around the garden is extremely species rich. Species seen on the outer edge of the wood include elm, ash, oak, hazel, blackthorn, field maple, hornbeam and elder. It would be a mistake to attribute this richness to great age in the boundary because Grotto Wood did not exist until after 1605, when the boundaries here were aligned in a completely different way. The richness comes either from favourable conditions pertaining locally, as a result of deliberately planting in the last 300 years or a mixture of both factors.

The interior of the wood is a mass of unmanaged former coppice, fallen trees and scrubby undergrowth dominated by elder, bramble and nettles, which is locally extremely dense. Grotto Wood was once renown for its yews, probable remnants of the garden plantings, but most of these have now been removed. Only about six or seven of these trees survive standing today, and they are so scattered around the wood that they give no coherent clues to any earlier planting pattern. The edges of the three ponds have been colonised by young sycamore, many with upwards of ten years growth. There are a number of old trees in the vicinity of the ponds, but a number of these have fallen into the ponds. The floor of the lowest pond has been partly colonised by young sycamore.

4.1.2 Vegetation details

The absence of leaves and the poor light conditions during the visit made definite identification difficult in some cases. The information given here is therefore provisional, and ideally should be checked in the summer.

i) The site has a partial cover of a few good, tall, largely clean-stemmed standard trees. This suggests on-going management of timber until about 20 years ago. The standards comprise a dozen or so oaks, and about the same number of ash. Given the fertility of the soil and the good water supply, these trees are unlikely to be more than 100 years old, and are probably rather less. The exceptions are an oak to the west of the bottom pond, and an ash east of the mount. Both could be 120 years old.

This suggests that the woodland described in 1807 was cropped after about 100 years, and the site restocked.

ii) There are also a number of large hornbeams on the site. One or two could be more than a 100 years old, but most are rather less. In addition there are a lot of good young hornbeams, which at first glance appear to be self-sown regeneration from seed, a few decades old, but which, on closer inspection, look as though they could be growing from the remains of old coppice stools - further investigation is needed. If they are coppice growth they may have been thinned to provide a few good trees, again suggesting postive management in the past.

iii) There are some young semi-mature sycamore in the wood, but no seedlings or young saplings were noticed. Given the amount of light reaching the floor of the wood this is very surprising, and suggests quite recent management. The sycamore do not appear to have invaded the wood, and may have been planted as shade trees in the 18th-century garden. There is one large old sycamore stool with several mature stems west of the top pool.

iv) There are at least two elm species present, and possibly three. The external hedge contains the usual English Elm (*Ulmus procera*), probably intentionally planted. This does not seed, and has suckered into the outer parts of the site, especially in the north. However the suckers are affected by Dutch Elm Disease, and die when they reach the large sapling stage. There are no larger English Elms present on-site. The second elm species appears to be the Huntingdon Elm (*Ulmus x hollandica 'Hollandica'*) occurring within the south of the site. These elms are quite young, but look healthy. There was a fashion for planting this elm in the 19th century. The third possible species is represented by two or three small trees with small leaves, which remain green late into the autumn. They lie on the west side of the site.

v) West of the two northern ponds is a small group of wild cherry (*Prunus avium*) of unknown origin. It was planted historically for ornament and its high timber value. More recently it has been planted for its ecological and aesthetic value. Nevertheless, it is a native and may simply have self-seeded here.

vi) There are several mature yews on the site. Yews are notoriously difficult to date, but in good soil with reasonably free drainage they grow faster than it is often thought, especially in the early stages. Only one of these yews, on the eastern edge of the grotto, looks as though it was growing here in the mid-18th century. The others look a little young, possibly about 200 years? One possibility is that the yews were grubbed out or cut to ground level after 1787, and subsequently regrew or grew from seed in the soil. Yew, being very shade-tolerant, could have competed with the faster-growing timber and coppice trees.

vii) There is a scatter of field maple (*Acer compestre*) throughout the site that are probably self-sown from the adjacent hedges.

viii) Hazel coppice is scattered around the site. The stools do not look very old, suggesting they may be a relatively recent addition to the wood. It is not long since the stools were last cut, and there are now multiple thin regrowths which urgently need thinning.

ix) There is a lot of very old and derelict elder, especially in the north of the site. Elder is quite light-demanding, and these parts of the wood must have been quite open at times in the past (possibly when the yews were cleared out in 1859, and at least once again in the 20th century). Their poorly formed nature may be the combined result of the loose sandy soil and shade from above. They are unlikely to thrive again if the tree canopy is closed.

x) Scrub willow has established in two open areas in the south of the site. There are also one or two spindly hawthorn, struggling in the shade.

xi) Other understorey plants include a few clumps of dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) and *Symphoricarpos* (snowberry) plus a single laural - all seemingly planted in recent years as game cover. The first two species sucker freely, and will spread unless controlled. There is also a clump of guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*) in the southern pond depression. The source is unknown but it is a native and an attractive scrub.

xii) There are several clumps of bramble in the more open areas, plus a thin cover of nettles throughout the site. The nettles indicate fertility in the soil (especially high phosphate levels probably enhanced by bird droppings), and also ground disturbance in the fairly recent past.

xiii) There is one occurrence of Old Man's Beard (*Clamtis vitalba*) in the extreme north-west corner of the site. This may be retained provided it is controlled - otherwise it will swamp the site eventually.

xiv) The ground flora could not be properly assessed because of the season, but there is what could be the remains of extensive Dog's Mercury dying down for the winter.

4.2 Description of the earthworks

The present condition of the earthworks had little changed since the survey was carried out in 1995. They appeared to be slightly more overgrown, and some of the young trees on the site had become slightly larger, but the description given in 1995 still largely holds.

The survey demonstrates that a small-scale ornamental landscape once existed within the confines of what is now Grotto Wood. Remains of this landscape or 'garden' only survive today as a series of earthworks. These earthworks were surrounded by a ditch to form a rhomboidal shape with apsidal ends at the north and south. The enclosure so formed is progressively wider as it extends southwards.

At the north end of the site, in an approximately central position, is a large mound. This has a regular cyclic shape, with traces of what may have been a ridge or pathway about half way up on the north and west sides. On the south side are the remains of a trench, about 12m long and 2m wide, cut into the mound as part of amateur archaeological excavations earlier this century. The mound is between 28-30m in diameter, and a maximum of 3.7m high. Extending from its east and west sides is a bank that seems to form the northern boundary of the old garden. However, the wood has extended up to 15m to the north of this bank in places, and another ditch has been dug around this extension. This latter boundary seems to have been in existence at the time of the 1807 map of William Baker's estate, and so it may be an original feature.

Around the edges of the wood, except on part of the south side, there is a broad bank inside the outer ditch. This bank is up to 10m across its base in places, and seems to be surmounted by a gravel path, up to 5m wide. In a few places, yew trees can be found on the inner edge of this path, suggesting that a yew hedge may have divided the path from the inner garden. On the south-west side of the site, this raised walk changes and appears to drop below a slightly raised terrace. On the south-east edge, the path seems to continue as a raised bank, but later disturbance in this area has partly obscured the evidence.

To the south of the mound at the north end of the site is a series of three ponds running roughly centrally down the centre of the enclosed area. There is a steep drop of about 2.5m from the bottom of the mound to the bottom of the first pond. This pond is supplied by a spring in its north-east corner. The entry of this spring is surrounded by a small brick tank; the water currently fills the tank and flows over the top. However, this feature contains much silt and detritus from years of neglect, and it is not certain if this arrangement was intended.

The upper pond is approximately rectangular, being 35m by 10m, narrowing slightly to about 8m at its southern end. On its west bank, near the north end of the pond, is an irregularly excavated hollow, about 10m long and up to 5m wide. This has the appearance of a small quarry, with the waste spoil thrown up around its banks. It may, however, be all that remains of further garden features. Richard Dick's description given above records two bird aviaries near the mound and the upper pond, and this hollow may represent their site.

Below this pond is a roughly circular pond, about 18-19m in diameter, with a small island in the middle. According to contemporary descriptions this pond was once octagonal, with statues on the island. The feature is so silted and overgrown today that any sign of an octagonal shape has been eroded away. Between the first and second ponds a few bricks and a large flint block remains at the place where the water flowed from one to the other. These might be taken to be the remains of a sluice; flints are described by Dick as being placed here to imitate rockwork, possibly for a small cascade.

Below the circular pond is a further rectangular pond similar to the northern pond. This is about 32m long and 8m wide, tapering slightly towards its southern end. The banks around this pond are up to 1.5m higher than its bottom.

At the south end of the wood is a large apse-shaped projection of about 45-50m in length, with a maximum of about 40m wide at its northern end where it joins the main body of the wood. Within this area is a roughly crescent-shaped mound. The mound curves slightly around the bottom of the lower pond. Between the pond and the mound is a curving depression, which has the appearance of a sunken walk leading to the inner hollow of the crescent. The crescent is about 30m across its long axis, and about 16m wide across its centre. The long axis is aligned roughly east-west. At its highest point on its eastern side, the mound is about 2.65m above the sunken 'path' on its north side, and almost 3m higher than the outside of the wood.

In its centre, the mound has sunk, making the two outer 'horns' of the crescent up to a metre higher than the centre. It is on the north of this hollow that it is believed that the entrance to the grotto was situated. According to Richard Dick's description, this was made of rockwork and shells, but a later source claims the materials were removed and sold to a Mr Kirby. It is possible that the hollow in the top of the crescent mound is where the structure within has been dug out and removed.

All around the perimeter of the apsidal projection, and along the two southern edges of the wood adjoining, is a deep ditch. This is over 5m wide and up to 2m deep in places, and is far more substantial than the boundary ditches around the main body of the wood. At its far eastern end this ditch shows signs of having been back-filled. A further point of note is what appears to be an excavated disturbance in the far southern end of the ditch. Although it is possible this may have been caused by animals, it has the appearance of being originally man-made. At the time of the survey, there was water seeping into this hole, seemingly from the north. It is possible that this was the original exit of the water that once flowed through the grotto from the ponds.

The original entrance to the garden was in the south-east corner of the main body of the wood. The raised bank that surrounds most of the site seems to begin here. During a visit in June 1994 an old iron gate post was observed on the east side of this bank, a few metres inside the wood. When the earthwork survey was made in March 1995, this post was no longer visible. It seems, therefore, that it may have removed between these two dates.

The only area of damage to the earthworks that was noted was the remains of an excavation trench dug by an amateur archaeologist at some time around the 1930s in the south side of the spiral mound. This is close to the conjectured position of a 'cave', described by Dick. The trench had either not be properly backfilled or it had suffered from subsequent slumping, as there was a clear and pronounced hollow on its site. This was still visible during the field work undertaken for this report, although it seems to have suffered further disturbance near the top of the mound. The most likely cause is burrowing by animals into the softer earth of the former trench.

On the west side of the octagonal pond is an old wooden caravan, with iron rimmed wheels. This could be of late 19th-century date, and is in a salvageable condition. There are a number of rusting oil drums adjoining it. These, together with remnant seed in the

caravan, suggest that this was a pheasant feeding site until about ten years ago. There is no evidence that this practice has continued since 1995.

5.0 Discussion of the nature and date of the earthworks

The historical relevance of the earthworks in Grotto Wood is discussed in Currie (1995 & forthcoming). This is largely repeated here, although some amendments have been made to bring the text up to date with the latest research. The individual features of the garden are discussed in greater detail in Appendix 1.

The earthworks contained within the wood are characteristic of a formal garden, which seems to have contained a spiral mount, three formal ponds, a raised gravel walk and another mound on the presumed site of the grotto and cold bath. It should be noted that the two linear ponds were thicker at the north end than the south. This seems to be an example of deliberately creating false perspective to make the vista longer. Other lesser features of unknown origin can be discerned, but the whole area is extremely heavily overgrown, and some very minor features may still remain hidden. This problem made it difficult to assess the site as fully as one would have liked, although it is considered that no major components of the conjectured garden have been missed. Stinging nettles exist in places up to 2m in height, and this suggests the soil has a high phosphate content, thereby supporting the idea that it was once an elaborate garden.

Besides brambles, thistles and nettles, the site has been damaged by root penetration from large trees, some of them subsequently having fallen, damaging the earthworks in consequence. However, despite this general dereliction, the site is otherwise well-preserved, and many features such as gravel paths, and even the supporting post of an iron gate recorded by Dick in the 18th century, could still be traced in the undergrowth at the time of the first visit in June 1994 (this post can no longer be found).

The earthworks seem to be a remarkable survival of a formal garden that, apart from the deliberate removal of all the architectural structures between 1775 and 1789, has been little disturbed since. Such gardens are rare in England, many commentators (wrongly) arguing that they were all destroyed by the work of Capability Brown and his contemporaries. Although abandoned formal garden sites are now being discovered by archaeological fieldwork and aerial photography, they are still unusual enough to be worthy of special preservation. The garden at Grotto Wood is important because of its curious design. The type of features it contained is also unusual for a garden still being admired in the later 18th century. It is also noteworthy in that it was a relatively small compact garden belonging to a smaller manor house. The complexity of the garden and its contents is particularly unusual for such a modest status site, and its study is considered to be worthy of at least regional, if not national, importance. Turner (1992, 169) has urged the need to study more of these lesser sites. This is needed to counter the imbalance in our perception of historic gardens that derives from an over-emphasis for studying sites of the highest status.

Research by Patience Bagenal has revealed that a similar grotto to the one described by Richard Dick existed at nearby Ware. The garden here also had a shell encrusted entrance,

an octagonal summer house and a room paved with small round stones. This grotto was built by a Quaker named John Scott, and was partly finished in 1764. The Brassey family who owned Roxford in the 18th century were Quakers and London Bankers. It is possible that Scott and the Brasseys attended the same local Quaker meetings, and knew each other. One of these sites may have been the influence for the other.

Grottoes and caves were quite common features in gardens in the 18th century. The poet, Alexander Pope, had a similar feature below his house at Twickenham in the early 18th century that was much admired, and written about. This feature was probably the influence for the many grottoes constructed in 18th century informal landscapes. Two of the most notable were at Claremont and Oatlands in Surrey, the designs of Stephen Wright in the 1750s and 1760s (Symes 1992). However, grottoes were known in formal gardens before this. Many consider that they were influenced by Italian examples, dating back to the Roman and early Renaissance periods (Anthony 1991). One of the most famous garden descriptions of the later 17th century, Sir William Temple's *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus*, written in 1685, describes a grotto as part of a formal garden layout.

'From the middle of this parterre is a descent of many steps flying on each side of a grotto that lies between them (covered with lead and flat) into the lower garden..... the grotto embellished with figures of shell rock-work, fountains and water-works.' (quoted in Anthony 1991, 56)

Leaving aside the location in the garden, this description is very similar to that at Roxford. It is also comparable to many other contemporary grotto descriptions, seeming to suggest that there were many affinities in the design of such features throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, both in formal and informal gardens.

Of the other main features with the Roxford garden, the mounts fountains and ponds are common features of early formal gardens. Mounts are known from at least the 16th century. A well-known example of mounts overlooking a moated garden can be seen today at Lyveden New Bield, Northamptonshire, began around 1597 (Taylor 1983, 21). By the early 18th century, these features were beginning to go out of fashion, as were fountains. Both types of features were lampooned by writers such as Joseph Addison and Alexander Pope (Currie 1990a, 29). In the oft-quoted *Epistle to Burlington* of 1731-32, Pope advises garden designers,

'Consult the Genius of the Place in all
That tells the Waters to rise, or fall.....

With silver-quiv'ring rills maeander'd o'er -
- Enjoy them, you! Villario can no more;
Tir'd of the scene Parterres and Fountains yield,
He finds at last he better likes a Field.....

The suff'ring eye inverted Nature sees,
Trees cut to Statues, Statues thick as trees,

With here a Fountain, never to be played,
And there a Summer-house, that knows no shade.

(Bateson 1951, 138, 141, 144)

Horace Walpole also criticised formal gardens as being in bad taste in the 18th century. His quote on elaborate gardens using extensive water-based features, like those at Roxford, may suggest one of the reasons why it fell out of use,

'But for magnitude and enormous cost, the hydraulic works, fountains and waterfalls, were the most extraordinary; indeed, their extreme first expense, and the constant demand for supporting them in perfection, led in a few years to their total disuse. Neglect soon occasioned decay, and decay caused their entire removal' (Wornum 1876, 97).

It is ironic that Roxford may have still been extant when Walpole was writing this text. It is the late survival of what appears to an entirely anachronistic form of garden that makes Roxford so unusual. Against all the dictates of taste of the later 18th century, it still seems to have been admired as late as 1775.

The date of the creation of the garden is a matter of considerable conjecture. As the manor was not a single land unit before about 1651, it is unlikely that the garden was created before that date. It can be shown to be in existence by 1766. Although this suggests that the Brasseys were probably responsible, the relatively long ownership of the Chalncombes, *c.* 1660-1700, must also be considered.

The stylistic evidence seems to suggest that the garden was created at some between 1651 and *c.* 1730. However, the opinion that formal gardens were not created after *c.* 1730 because of the changing fashion has been questioned recently. At Castle Bromwich Hall in the West Midlands, where the gardens were once claimed to be 'at the height of their sophistication in 1730', it has now been conclusively shown that the work on the greater formal walled garden did not begin until after 1730, and was still continuing in 1747 (Currie and Locock 1993). Elsewhere, at places like Thenford House, Northamptonshire (now post-coded as Oxfordshire) anachronistically formal features seem to have been created throughout the 18th century within an overall framework that was less formal (Currie 1992).

Such examples warn researchers not to be too dogmatic about dating gardens. Bagenal (op. cit.) hints that there is a possible connection between the grottoes of Roxford and Ware that may date the gardens at Grotto Wood nearer to the middle of the 18th century. Such evidence is tenuous, and any influence Roxford may have had at Ware may be the result of the former being an old-established local garden of repute. Nevertheless, it is something we can not state for certain. The late admiration of Roxford may indicate that formal gardens were only despised in courtly circles. In more out of the way places, they may have been admired well into the later 18th century. All that can be said with any form of certainty is that Roxford appeared to exist in its final form in 1766. Whether all the garden was created together, or whether it evolved over a number of years, with features like the grotto being

added to an earlier garden, is a question that can not be answered on the present evidence. The garden was still in existence in 1775, but had been destroyed by 1789. In 1859 a number of yews, possible remnants of the old gardens, were removed from the wood that had grown up over the site (op cit)

The description of the grotto, with its shell- and rock-work, may indicate a Rococo element to the garden. If this is the case, this may help to explain the late admiration. The Rococo tradition was favoured in smaller gardens in the 18th century, and was a tradition that ran parallel with the informal Landscape Movement. The only problem with this interpretation is that Rococo gardens were generally asymmetrical (Symes 1993, 100), whereas Roxford has decided formal elements. Nevertheless, there is no reason why the grotto and rockwork around the ponds could not have been an addition to a slightly earlier formal layout.

6.0 Conclusions

The earthworks in Grotto Wood are a fine example of an unusually well-preserved small formal garden. Although associated with Roxford manor house, a minor country residence, they could not be seen from the house. They do not appear to have provided significant views or vistas back to the house, either. The principal feature of the gardens seems to have been a grotto at its southern end. This is now marked by a large, but irregular, crescent-shaped mound just beyond the lowest of the three ponds. At the other extreme (north) of the garden is a large formal mount from which excellent views of the garden and the valley of the River Lea could once be obtained.

Two points seem to make this garden unusual, besides the fine state of preservation of the earthworks. These are the distance that it was located from the house, and the late date that it seems to have been admired. Although it is possible the garden was begun in the later 17th century, it was probably created in the early years of the 18th century. However, it does not receive any salutary notices until the second half of the 18th century, when formal gardens were supposedly out of fashion. The site is therefore one of a growing body of formal gardens that may have still been developed and admired at a time when garden historians once considered they would have been despised.

7.0 Copyright

8.0 Archive

Copies of the report were lodged with the client, the Hertfordshire County Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), and the National Monuments Record in Swindon, Wiltshire.

9.0 Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: notes on possible parallels for features at Grotto Wood, Roxford

This appendix appeared in the original report on the site by Currie (1995). It is reproduced here and updated to take account of more recent research.

1. Apsidal shape of the garden.

The apsidal-ended shape of the garden can be seen in the shape of contemporary ponds illustrated in garden designs in John James' work *The theory and practice of gardening* (London, 1712). This work is almost a direct copy of a work on French gardening published in Paris in 1709. Although the shape in James' designs is applied to ponds, its popularity is demonstrated, particularly in gardens of the French type. A fine use of the shape can be found in the formal mirror pond at Castle Bromwich, West Midlands, recently discovered by archaeology (Currie 1990b, 40, figure 7).

2. The spiral mount.

Ordinary mounts are common features in many formal gardens. They are possibly more common in the 16th and 17th centuries than in later formal gardens of the early 18th century. Spiral mounts could be found at three well-known sites, of widely differing dates. One, now vanished, existed at Hampton Court, Greater London, a creation of the 1530s (Symes 1993, 79). Some of the best surviving spiral mounts exist at Lyveden New Bield, Northamptonshire. Here are two large and two smaller mounts at the corners of a moated garden created at the very end of the 16th century (Taylor 1983, 46-7).

Another well-known example exists at Packwood House, Warwickshire. Although the spiral mount itself may be an original feature, the elaborate yew topiary surrounding it is now thought to be largely the work of 19th-century antiquarianism.

3. The ponds

Ponds in rectangular and octagonal shape are extremely common in formal gardens, and can be found everywhere. Both forms existed in the now largely vanished formal gardens at such famous sites as Stowe, Buckinghamshire and Boughton House, Northamptonshire, both dated to around 1700. At both sites the octagonal ponds were altered to create less formal lakes in the later 18th century.

4. Cascades between the ponds

The descriptions of the Roxford gardens suggest small rockwork cascades may have existed between the ponds. Occasional pieces of flint can be found where the water leaves the ponds to support this.

Although the opinion of garden historians is that cascades were rare in English formal gardens (Symes 1993, 28), this is not proving to be borne out by recent fieldwork. A number of examples have recently been recorded by this author, including the magnificent

example at The Gnoll, near Neath, South Wales (Currie and Locock 1994), recently restored to working order. Other smaller-scale examples of probable early 18th century date have been identified at Knowle Hill, Derbyshire, a property owned by the Landmark Trust (Currie 1993), and Forde Abbey, Devon. The latter are shown on a print dated 1727 recently discovered by the owners (Alice Roper, owner, pers. comm.). A small unobtrusive example was also excavated recently at Thenford House, Northamptonshire (Currie 1992a). A fine example of a modest cascade between two ponds, with associated grottoes either side of it, has recently been examined by archaeological means at Upper Lodge, Bushy Park, Greater London (Currie forthcoming). Grotto Wood is one of many sites where small cascades in formal gardens have been overlooked because garden historians tend to notice only the grand and obvious examples like Chatsworth, Derbyshire.

5. Raised walks

Raised walks were common features in formal gardens. A fine high terraced walk survives around the former formal gardens of Shaw House, Berkshire, one of the homes of the Dukes of Chandos (Godwin Arnold 1977). This example is much higher than that at Roxford. Their purpose was to give views over the garden from many different angles. There are some tentative suggestions at Roxford that there may have been an internal yew hedge obscuring views. It is possible that the visitor was shielded from seeing into the garden, but brought round to the spiral mount in the first instance, from which the garden was revealed. A reading of Richard Dick's visit suggests that this may have been the case.

6. The Grotto

This has been much discussed in the main text as a feature of both formal and informal gardens (see section 5.0). Perhaps the best known that is similar to the description of the Roxford Grotto is the world-famous grotto at Stourhead, Wiltshire, created *c.* 1748. This grotto, like Roxford, looks out on to a pond, and has fountains and other water-orientated ornaments within it (Woodbridge 1989, 17, 47-50). It is probably more grand than the Roxford example, but is probably later, and is unlikely to have been an influence. Excavated examples have been recently examined at Shilston Barton, Devon and Bushy Park, London (Currie 2000b; forthcoming).

7. Cold bath

Woodfield (1991, 132) argues that baths only found favour in formal gardens in the early 18th century, with 'the earliest dating from the 1720s'. An example was created at Castle Bromwich, West Midlands, in the 1730s (Currie & Locock 1993). One of the best-known examples is at Packwood House, Warwickshire. Many, like Packwood, were deeply sunken features.

8. The aviaries

Bird aviaries were increasingly popular in 19th-century gardens (Symes 1993, 14), but known earlier examples are very rare. They are referred to in Roman and medieval Italian

gardens, and so it is probable that they are found in gardens of all periods, but have not been well-recorded during the formal garden period in post-medieval England.

9. Internal arrangements of the gardens at Grotto Wood.

Drury and Andrews' map of 1766 shows some geometric designs within the garden at Roxford. It is difficult to say how accurate these are, but as they are probably the only indications of the internal gardens beyond the ponds and the mounds, one may assume there is an element of truth in them. What they represent must remain purely conjectural, but some suggestions are given.

The more elaborate design in the NW corner may have been created from low yew hedges. Such designs were common. They appear to be shown on early 18th-century prints of the North Garden at Castle Bromwich (Currie & Locock 1993), and on the east side of the main garden at Southwick Park, near Portsmouth, Hampshire (reproduced in Soffe 1985, 28, fig. 1).

The latter shows an adjacent design on the west side of the main vista created from grass plats bordered by gravel paths. This may be the form of the quartered design in the SW corner at Roxford. Such Spartan designs, often ornamented only by topiaried yew and statuary, were very popular in late formal gardens of the first half of the 18th century. The two sets of quartered designs on the east of the ponds at Roxford may have been similar plats, orchards or even more functional vegetable plots. Although the latter might be considered unlikely in a garden of seeming ornamental type, they are not impossible.

10. Yew Trees

The small number of yews left in Grotto Wood seem to be remnants of the yew hedges and topiary that may have formed a major element in the planted design. It is recorded in 1859 that many of the yews in the wood were removed. This suggests that there were once many more than currently survive. Many of the surviving yews appear to be strategically placed to have once been part of hedges or topiary aligned along the main features of the gardens. Yew hedging and topiary were extremely popular in formal gardens, particularly in the later types.

11. The date of the Grotto Wood garden

Since the writing of the 1995 report on the earthworks, the site has come in for some discussion between bodies such as English Heritage and the Garden History Society. Patience Bagenal has shown the author correspondence relating to this, and the author has confirmed that these discussions have taken place in conversation various members of staff of English Heritage and the Archaeology Section of Hertfordshire County Council. During these conversations, it became apparent to the author that his previous opinions on the date of the garden may have been slightly misinterpreted. There is little point in discussing exactly what the author said in Currie (1995), as the wording is now seen to be ambiguous,

and the author accepts that this is the case. It is therefore thought appropriate to clarify what the author thinks about the date of the garden.

The reader is referred to section 5.0 in this present report, as this is largely what appeared in the 1995 report as the discussion chapter. This gives the writer's opinion more accurately than the 1995 conclusion chapter, which can be read ambiguously. One should not confuse the unusually late date of the praise for the garden with the date of the garden itself, which is what may have happened in present official circles.

Since the original author undertook his first survey of the earthworks in 1995, Sybil Wade has suggested that the Dick's description of the grotto and other rockwork features in the garden seem to introduce a Rococo element into the underlying formal garden. These elements may have been later introductions to the original garden. If so, it may be because there was a Rococo element in the garden that contemporaries were able to give it such praise. Rococo was a lesser parallel fashion with the English Landscape Movement in the mid-18th century. It was particularly suited to small gardens, and was probably taken up by those who did not have the resources to follow the other fashion, which required greater space. The only problem with this interpretation is that Rococo gardens were usually asymmetrical (Symes 1993, 100), but this can be explained if the grotto and rockwork were superimposed over an earlier formal garden. The fashion had largely passed by the 1780s, which is when the Grotto Wood garden was destroyed.