



Northamptonshire Archaeology

Archaeological watching brief during work on the
north side of the Eleven Acre Lake at Stowe,
Buckinghamshire



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Report 11/60

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QUALITY CONTROL

	Print name	Signed	Date
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Approved by	Stephen Parry		

OAS/S REPORT FORM

PROJECT DETAILS		
Project name	An archaeological Watching Brief during work at the north side of the Eleven Acre Lake, Stowe, Buckinghamshire	
Short description	An archaeological watching brief was conducted during the excavation of a series of trial trenches across the historic line of a lakeside path to the north side of the Eleven Acre Lake at Stowe Landscape Gardens, Buckinghamshire. The gravel surfaced path was located in all but one of the trenches and the line of the path corresponded well with the route indicated from contemporary site maps.	
Project type	Watching brief	
Site status	Grade I Registered Park and Garden	
Previous work	None (in this specific area)	
Current Land use	National Trust gardens	
Future work	Unknown	
Monument type/ period	Landscape feature/post-medieval	
Significant finds	None	
PROJECT LOCATION		
County	Buckinghamshire	
Site address	Stowe Landscape Gardens, Stowe, Buckingham, MK18 5EH	
OS Easting & Northing	(Centred on) SP 67395 36990	
Study area (sq.m)	Total area along lake edge approx 500m in length	
Height OD	c105m aOD	
PROJECT CREATORS		
Organisation	Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Project brief originator	Gary Marshall, Regional Archaeologist	
Project Design originator	Verbal agreement, Joe Prentice	
Director/Supervisor	Joe Prentice	
Project Manager	Steve Parry, Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Sponsor or funding body	The National Trust	
PROJECT DATE		
Start date	September 2010	
End date	September 2010 (Revised November 2011)	
ARCHIVES	Location (Accession no.)	Content (eg pottery, animal bone etc)
Physical		
Paper		
Digital		

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**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF DURING WORK
ON THE NORTH SIDE OF THE ELEVEN ACRE LAKE AT
STOWE, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
SEPTEMBER 2010**

Abstract

An archaeological watching brief was conducted during the excavation of trial trenches across the historic line of a lakeside path to the north side of the Eleven Acre Lake at Stowe Landscape Gardens, Buckinghamshire. The gravel surfaced path was located in all but one of the trenches and the line of the path corresponded well with the route indicated from contemporary site maps.

1 INTRODUCTION

A programme of archaeological work was undertaken in September 2010 during the excavation of a series of transverse trial trenches across the former line of a lakeside path on the north side of the Eleven Acre Lake at Stowe Landscape Gardens, Buckinghamshire (centred on NGR SP 67395 36990, Fig 1). The work was undertaken by Northamptonshire Archaeology on behalf of the National Trust and followed a verbal Brief for an archaeological watching brief outlined by Gary Marshall, Regional Archaeologist, Thames and Solent Region. No specification was created in response, however, all conditions regarding the requirements in the Brief were adhered to, and complied with the procedural document MoRPHE issued by English Heritage (EH 2006) and the appropriate national standards and guidelines, as recommended by the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA 2008).

The work was undertaken in order to identify, if possible, the correct historical route of the path prior to its reinstatement by the National Trust as part of their on-going restoration of features within the designed landscape, and to improve access for visitors.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Location, geology and history

Stowe Landscape Gardens is a Grade I Registered Park surrounding Stowe House, former home of the Temple family, later the Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos. It is situated in north Buckinghamshire close to the Northamptonshire border approximately

3km north of the county town of Buckingham. The area of investigation is located at approximately 105m aOD along the edge of the lake.

The underlying geology has been mapped by The British Geological Survey of Great Britain as comprising Glaciofluvial Deposits; sand and gravel (England and Wales, Sheet 219, Buckingham).

The connection with Stowe began in the early seventeenth century when Sir Thomas Temple (1566-1637), first baronet of Stowe attempted to involve himself in politics in nearby Buckingham (Robinson 1990). His grandson, Richard (1634-1697), began to build a new house on the site of the present house in 1680. This house was subsequently extended to approximately the proportions of the present building. In the eighteenth-century Richard Temple-Grenville (1711-1779) undertook a comprehensive re-modelling of the house using Robert Adam initially as architect, although his proposals were modified by Thomas Pitt and completed in c1779. The family retained the estate until 1922 when the contents were sold and the estate put up for sale. It was bought by a property speculator who intended to donate it to the nation, but was unable to establish an endowment. It was then purchased in one lot and the school established. The house and ancillary buildings, along with twentieth-century school buildings are within the ownership of the Stowe House Preservation Trust whilst the designed landscape has been held by the National Trust since 1989.

It was during the lifetime of Sir Richard Temple, the fourth baronet, Viscount Cobham (1675-1749) that the gardens became the focus of attention and universally admired since, though most of the work here was not undertaken before 1711 (National Trust Guidebook 1997). He used the leading architects and garden designers of the day to aid his works, and these included Bridgeman, Vanbrugh, Gibbs and Kent. The Eleven Acre Lake was created in c1726 under the direction of Bridgeman by the damming of a natural valley in an area newly added to the gardens. Around the year 1730 Gibbs was replaced by William Kent who designed two buildings on the southern side of the lake, the Temple of Venus and the Hermitage, both c1731. No significant buildings were located close to the northern shore, although the statue of Queen Caroline is located slightly to the north-west today having been moved here in the 1760s, displacing the Fane of Diana (or Gibb's Building) which was itself moved elsewhere within the gardens.

2.2 The Eleven Acre Lake

Not only does Stowe retain its designed landscape and buildings in a remarkably intact manner, but it has also been the subject of numerous plans and guides since the beginning of its inception. These allow a sequence of its development to be investigated and which have helped to target the Trust's restoration. A plan by Sarah Bridgeman of 1739 shows the Eleven Acre Lake to be angular in outline, with a small, detached section located to the north-west (Fig 2).

By the time of the Benton Seeley guide book plan of 1753 (the first was published in 1744) the lake had been transformed into a more curvilinear shape and the detached body of water incorporated to form a larger, more naturalistic, shape (Fig 3). The Seeley guide books continued to be printed into the nineteenth century and they show how the gardens were transformed over time. Whilst all historical documents should be regarded with some degree of scepticism, the consistency of the depicted detail, and the confirmation by archaeology over the last few years indicates that in general these plans can be relied upon. The northern edge of the lake is planted with groups of trees as well as single lines bordering the shore.

No path is indicated on north side of the lake in the guides from the 1750s up to, and including, the 1820 plan, though there are a number indicated on the south side for all of this time. However, a plan by William Smith of 1827 shows a path skirting the entire lake, including for the first time along the northern shore (Fig 4). This shows the path to lie at times close to, and at others farther away from, the lake edge, with the planting more randomly placed in irregular groups rather than in clumps interspersed with linear sections.

A slightly later 1843 plan by Henry Howard shows essentially the same configuration apart from a spur leading north-westwards from near the eastern end on the north side through a grove of trees in the direction of the path (Gurnets Walk) which leads from the dam between the two lakes to the Rotondo (Fig 5).

3 METHODOLOGY

The trenching was undertaken by National Trust staff over a period of three days (21, 22 and 27 September 2010) under archaeological supervision along the northern side of the lake. In total twenty-four trenches were opened using a mini-digger fitted with a toothless ditching bucket (Fig 6). The trenching progressed from the western end of

the lake and terminated at the eastern. Trench numbers 1-24 were allocated on site (see photo blackboards) and numbers 1176 onwards were allocated by the National Trust during post-excavation. The latter only have been used in this report.

Each trench was cleaned to define the width of the gravel path surface and each trench then photographed. The trenches were individually planned onto a 1:500 survey provided by the National Trust and the location of the gravel path recorded within the outline of each trench. Since the make-up, profile and width of the path was effectively consistent along the entire exposed length, only a sample section was recorded.

The watching brief was carried out in accordance with *Standard and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief* (IfA 2008). Northamptonshire Archaeology standard Health and Safety Guidelines were followed and a full Risk Assessment was produced prior to the commencement of the archaeological investigation.

4 THE WATCHING BRIEF

Trench 1176

The westernmost of all of the trenches, positioned at the eastern end of a short, modern stretch of gravel path laid recently over geotextile membrane to provide a route to the island on which is placed a boathouse (Fig 6). Partly due to the disturbance caused by the creation of the modern path over membrane, the gravels in this trench were disturbed, but enough remained, particularly on the northern side to establish the presence of the earlier path material.

Trenches 1177-1182 inclusive

Each trench located the former gravel path, and in these trenches there was no modern disturbance (Fig 6). The path retained a slight camber, rising gently towards the centre and tailing away on either side (Fig 6, detail, Plate 1). There was no evidence of any edging either in the form of timber revetment or larger stones, and appeared to have been constructed by simply digging out topsoil to the required width and filling the resultant trench with natural gravels. These do not appear to have been sorted as they ranged in size from sand to larger pieces of both rounded and angular flint pebbles up to 75mm in size. It is likely that the gravels were quarried within the confines of the estate, either close to Home Farm or New Inn where quarries are known to have existed.

The route of the path veered away from the lake edge towards the northern end of this section, as is also shown on both the 1827 and 1843 plans. It was noted on site that Trench 1179, which was located at roughly the point where the path swerved away from the course it had taken thus far, parallel to the lake edge, provided a good view point to the Temple of Venus, the Hermitage and the western of the two Lakeside Pavilions. Given the fact that the paths at Stowe are noted for their careful disposition it was assumed that this may have been a deliberate change of course and was used as a view point from which to view these buildings.

However, it appears from the 1827 plan that only the Hermitage would have been visible, the other buildings being obscured by clumps of trees. At the same time, a view along the length of the path which leads roughly north also gave a view of the Rotondo, though now partly obscured by mature tree growth. The evidence must therefore remain equivocal as to whether this change in direction of the path was a deliberate design element or was simply a response to a physical feature such as a tree or waterlogged area.

Trench 1183

This trench had been excavated out of sequence with the others and had, as a consequence, missed the former gravel path (Fig 6). No archaeological features were detected.

Trenches 1184-1186

These trenches completed the evaluation of the former path along this section of the lakeside, south of the natural stream which runs along the base of a shallow natural valley from the north (Fig 6). They all revealed the same sequence of gravel, with a consistent make-up and width, all shallowly buried beneath topsoil.

On the 1827 plan the path, where it crosses the stream, simply curves around the contour of the slope parallel with the lake edge before heading south-east, whilst on the 1843 plan a second path has been created, probably on the east side of the stream, and parallel to it up the valley to the north.

Due to previous modern disturbance to install concrete drain pipes where the stream passes beneath the current grass path around the lake, and the proximity of the modern golf course, no trench was positioned at the point where the two sections are

likely to diverge. At present the section of path which is aligned parallel with the stream is not to be re-instated.

Trenches 1187-1192

This section of path is aligned almost straight and forms a transect across the neck of a slight bulge in the lake edge (Fig 6). The last trench in this section (1192) was placed close to the western edge of a copse of self-sown trees and which prevented investigation to the immediate east due to their close spacing. All trenches revealed the same method of construction as previously noted apart from in Trench 1191 which crossed a naturally wet area. Here the topsoil was a very wet, black organic soil, presumably simply natural build-up, and visible on the surface as an area of small rush (*Juncaceae* family, specific genus uncertain, but possibly *Juncus filiformis*).

However, this wet area was clearly also wet at the time the path was constructed as there were large pieces of limestone, particularly along the northern edge, presumably in an attempt to provide a firmer foundation and perhaps even raise the path slightly above the wet subsoil (Plate 2). No distinct edging was observed, but rather an irregular dump of stones up to 250mm-300mm in size, all undressed. The remainder of the path within the edges of the larger stones was as observed elsewhere.

Trenches 1193-1198

This section of path is located to the east of the dense copse of self-sown trees in an area of more open woodland (Fig 6, Plate 3). The same sequence of gravels and sands beneath a shallow topsoil was revealed, though in places the latter has been eroded away by the foot-fall of modern visitors almost down onto the gravel of the former path. In Trench 1194 the full width of the gravel path was not exposed since there were large tree roots on the south side of the trench, and these were left *in situ*. Trench 1198 was more deeply buried than had previously been encountered, this was due to groundworks associated with works to the dam between the Eleven Acre and Octagon Lakes in recent years. This deeper layer of topsoil comprised a dark loam containing fragments of modern brick and concrete. A large tree was also positioned close to the southern side of the trench which precluded the excavation of the full width of the gravel path. All of these trenches revealed a much more mixed natural, in some places almost clean clay as in the preceding trenches, in others almost clean orange sands and gravels which made it harder to determine the exact position of the gravel path. In each case the camber of the path was most useful in indicating the location of the former route.

A number of trenches were opened to the north of the lakeside path area in order to try to locate the spur of path which connects the lake-edge path with Gurnets Walk and which is indicated on the 1843 Howard plan (Fig 5). The positions of these trenches were determined as much by the locations of trees and the spaces between them as by the areas where it was thought the former route of the path lay.

Trench 1199

Only one trench revealed evidence which was thought likely to be evidence of the former path (Fig 6). The natural subsoil was varied and comprised a mixture of clays and gravels. Two areas of higher level gravel were thought might represent the former gravel path, one at the eastern end of the trench and another at the western. Both comprised a clearly delineated band of sand and gravel aligned north-south across the trench, and both appeared to have a camber which was thought was not likely to be a feature of the natural underlying subsoil. However, when the 1843 Howard map was overlaid onto the modern survey it was found that the westernmost of the two possible paths was located in almost exactly the position indicated (Plate 4). It is therefore thought that this represents the 1843 period path, and whilst the gravel area to the east may be simply a natural gravel outcrop, it might indicate the position of another path of unknown date, since none are indicated on any historic maps in this area.

Re-instatement

During the re-instatement of the lakeside path the exact route of the historic path was followed as closely as possible apart from a short section between trenches 1186 and 1187 (Fig 6). This section of reinstated path was located slightly to the south of the original route due to the proximity of a fairway of the Stowe Golf Club. During the re-instatement a cast iron 4 inch pipe was uncovered in the re-aligned section of path; its significance is unclear but the material from which it was made indicates that it is most likely of modern date. The observation and plotting of the re-aligned path and the cast-iron pipe were carried out by Gary Marshall, National Trust Archaeologist.

5 FINDS

No finds were recovered from any of the trenches.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The gravel lakeside path, known from plans to have existed from the early years of the nineteenth-century, has been shown to survive along almost the entire northern side of the lake where investigated. It first appears on an estate map of 1827 along the

perimeter of the lake with a spur leading northwards to connect with Gurnets Walk by 1843. It comprises a gently cambered sand and gravel surface buried beneath a build-up of natural soil which has accumulated since it went out of regular use and maintenance. This is likely to have been around the time of the estate's sale in 1922 when the family last occupied the house as a private residence. It is not clear, however, how much of the gardens were maintained in their entirety up to this date, so it may be that the path went out of use at some period before this.

The cambered surface of the path appears to have been made from either poorly graded, or un-graded natural sands and gravels, almost certainly from quarries on the estate (most likely at Home Farm or New Inn). It seems to have been created in a shallow trench, presumably formed by simply removing the turf and topsoil to the desired width, and then filling the trench with the gravels. Such paths, with no substantial sub-base were effective when used by relatively small numbers of visitors and were easy to repair since all they required was a top-dressing of gravel when low spots appeared. They did not require drainage and they would be relatively easy to keep weed-free by hoeing in dry weather.

No hard edging appears to have been used and, indeed, this would not be expected in this part of the wider designed landscape where hard edges and sharp distinctions were not desired in a naturalistic setting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are extended to the National Trust staff for help during the fieldwork and for the use of historic maps in this report. Thanks also to Tony Chivers, a National Trust volunteer, for his help with trench cleaning and recording.

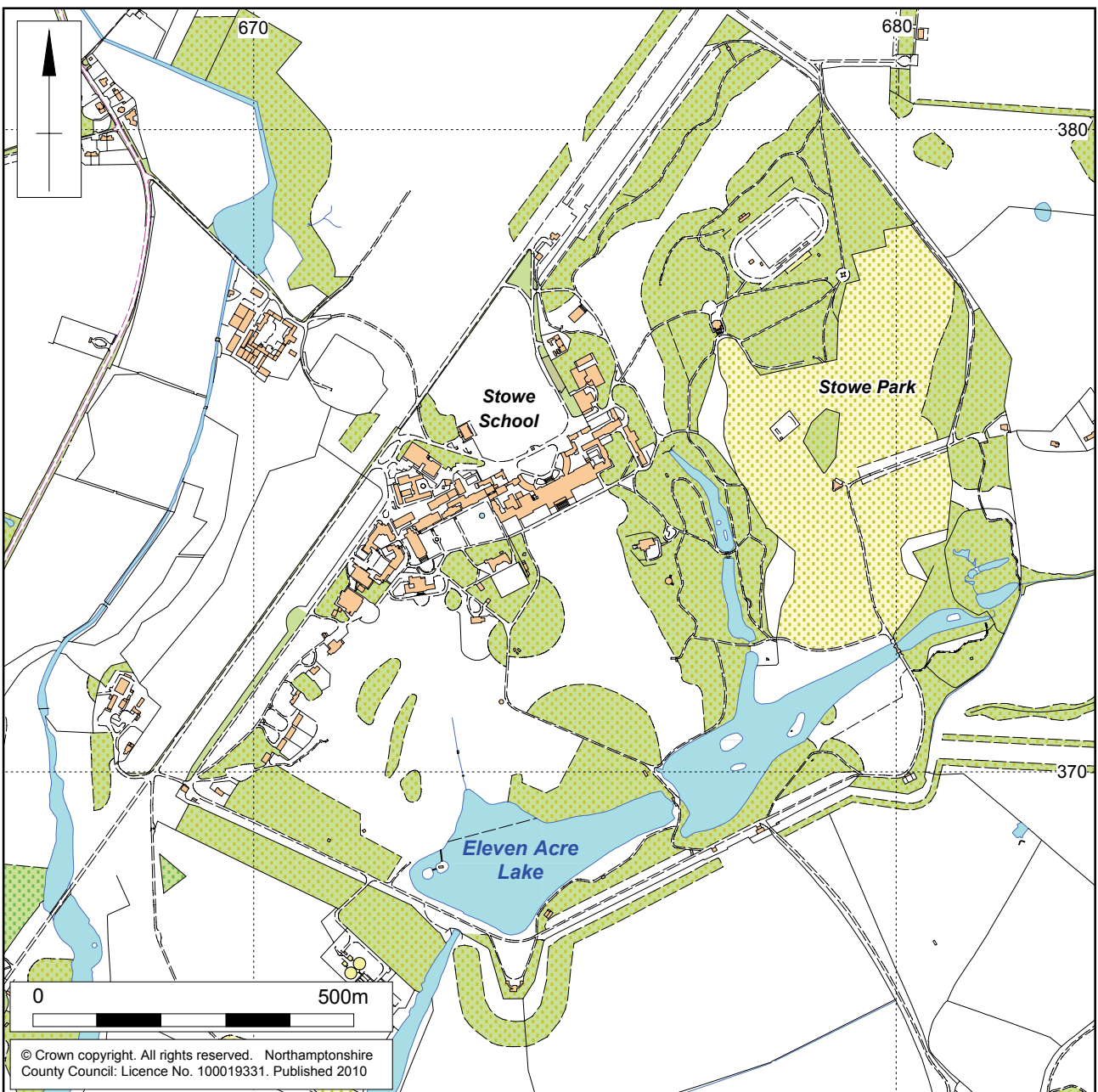
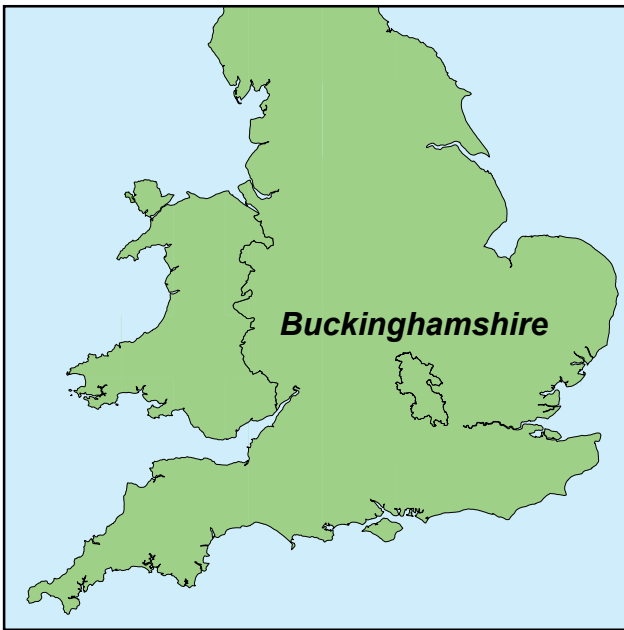
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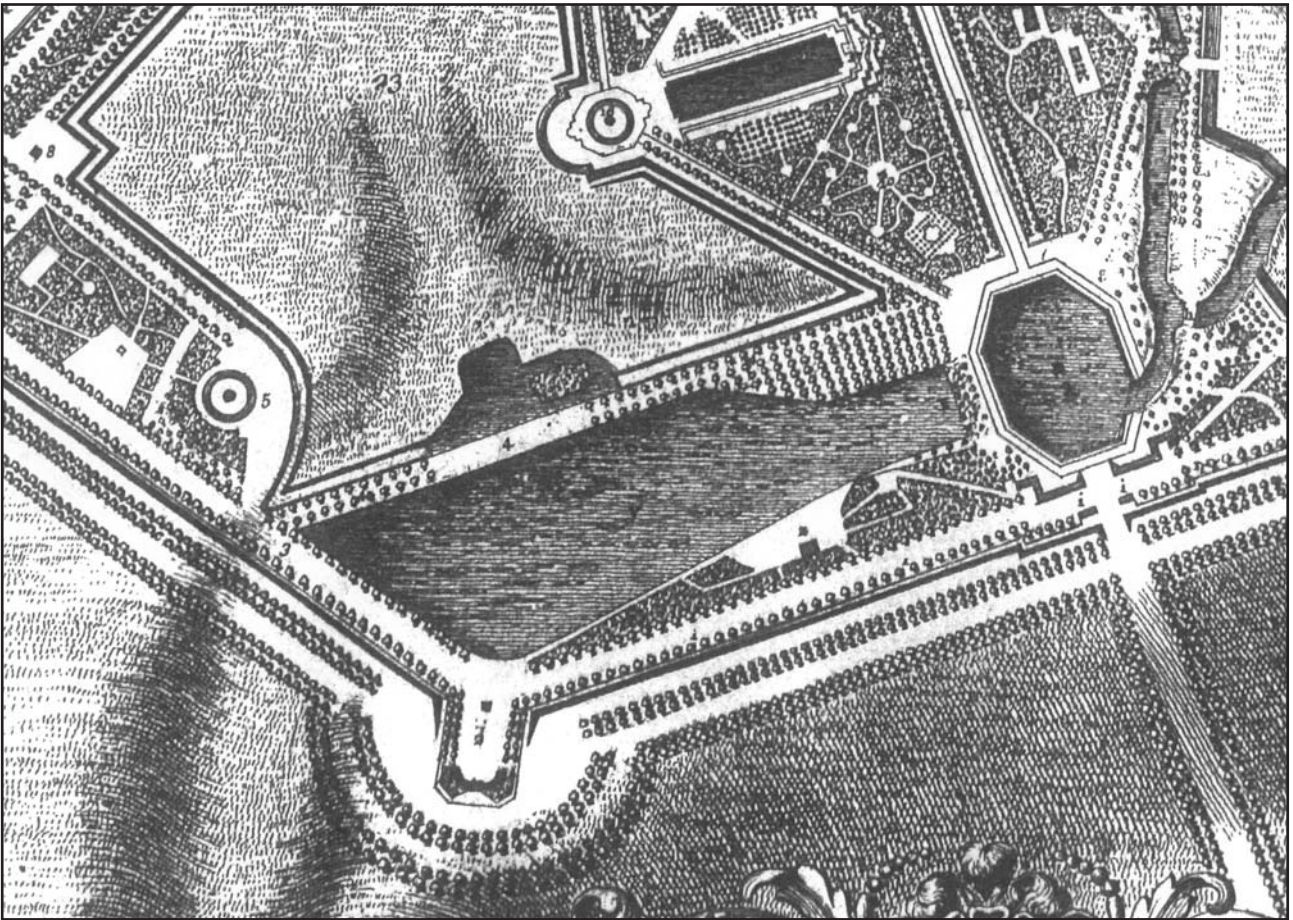
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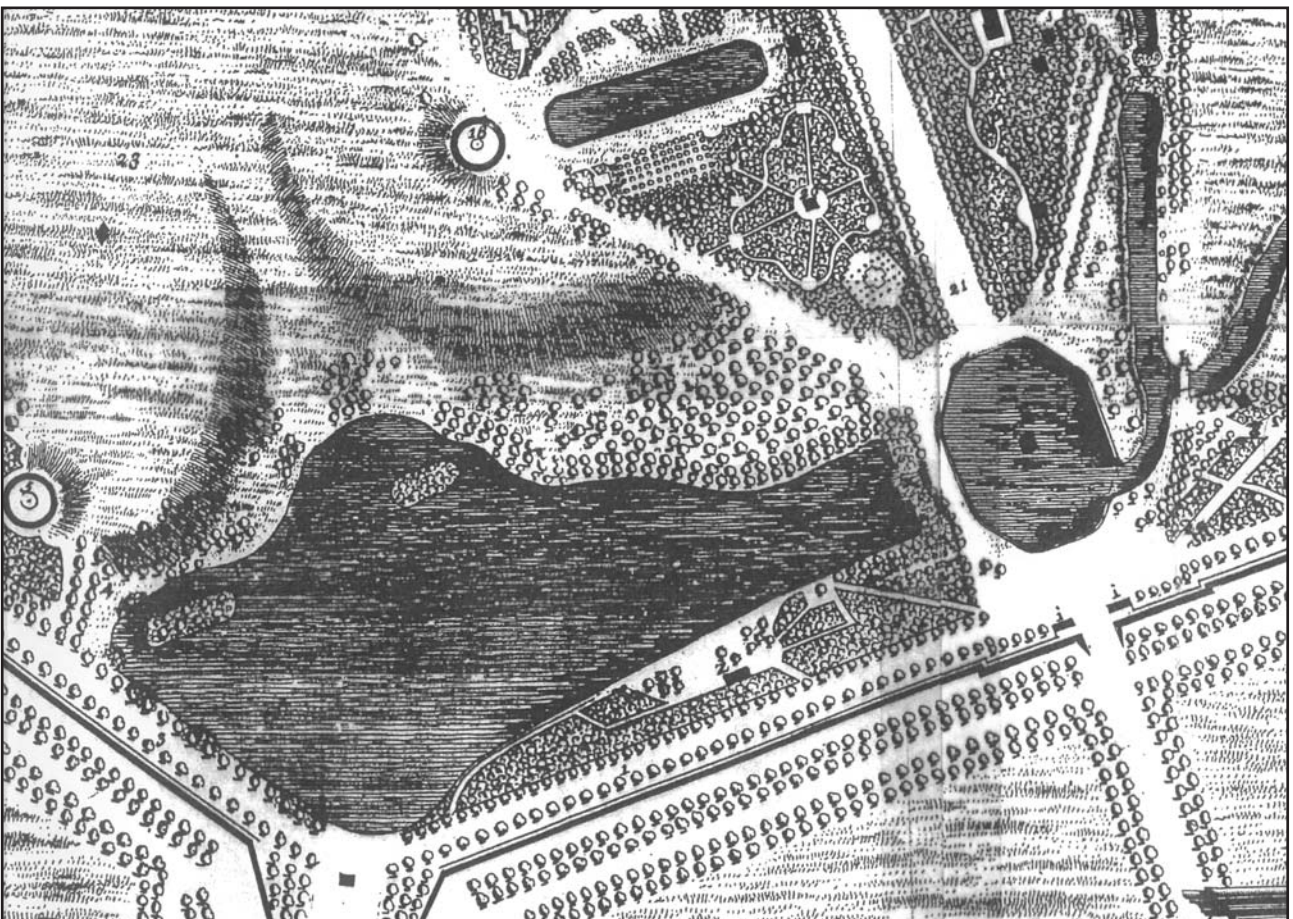


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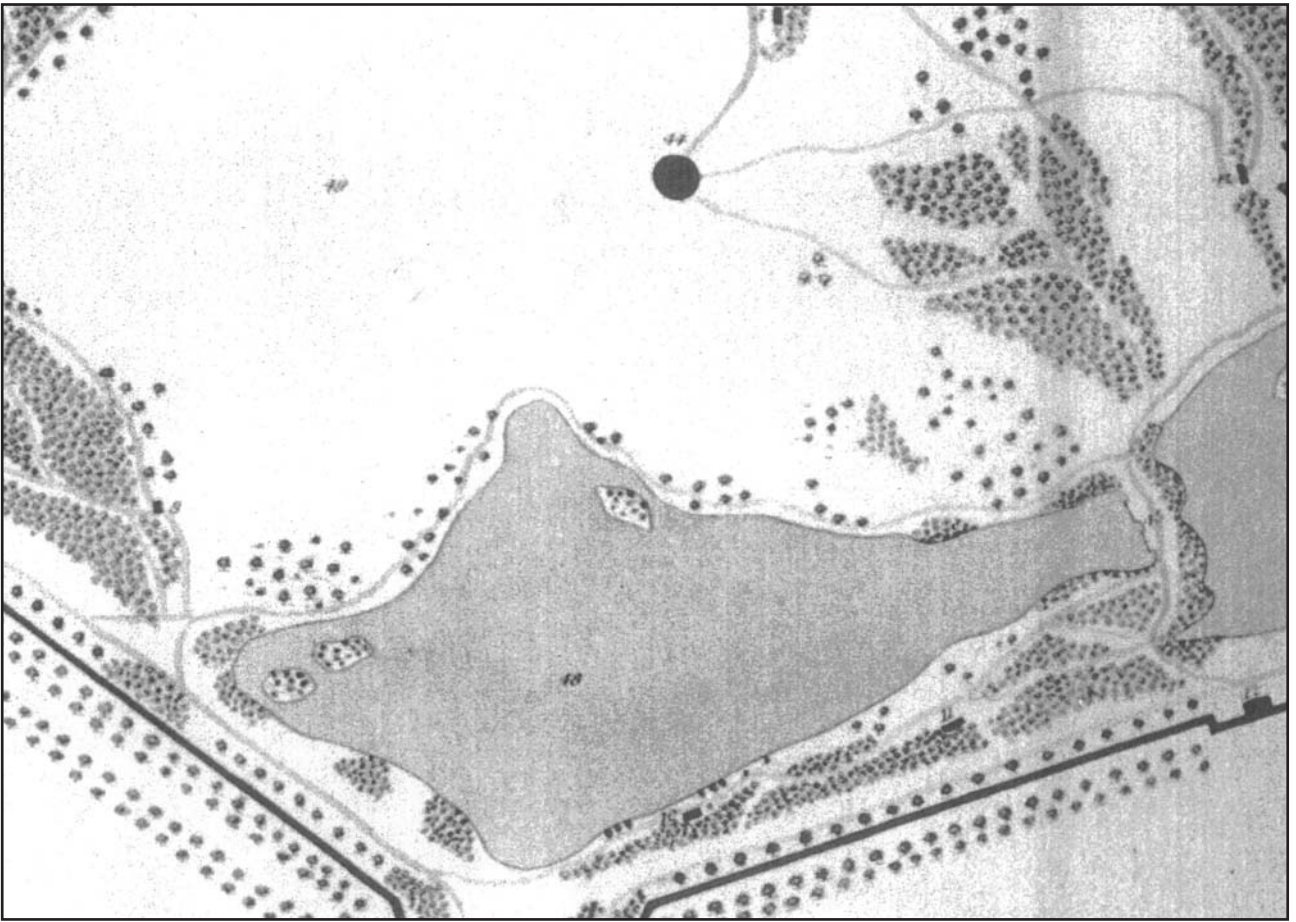
Site location Fig 1



1739 plan of the garden by Sarah Bridgeman Fig 2



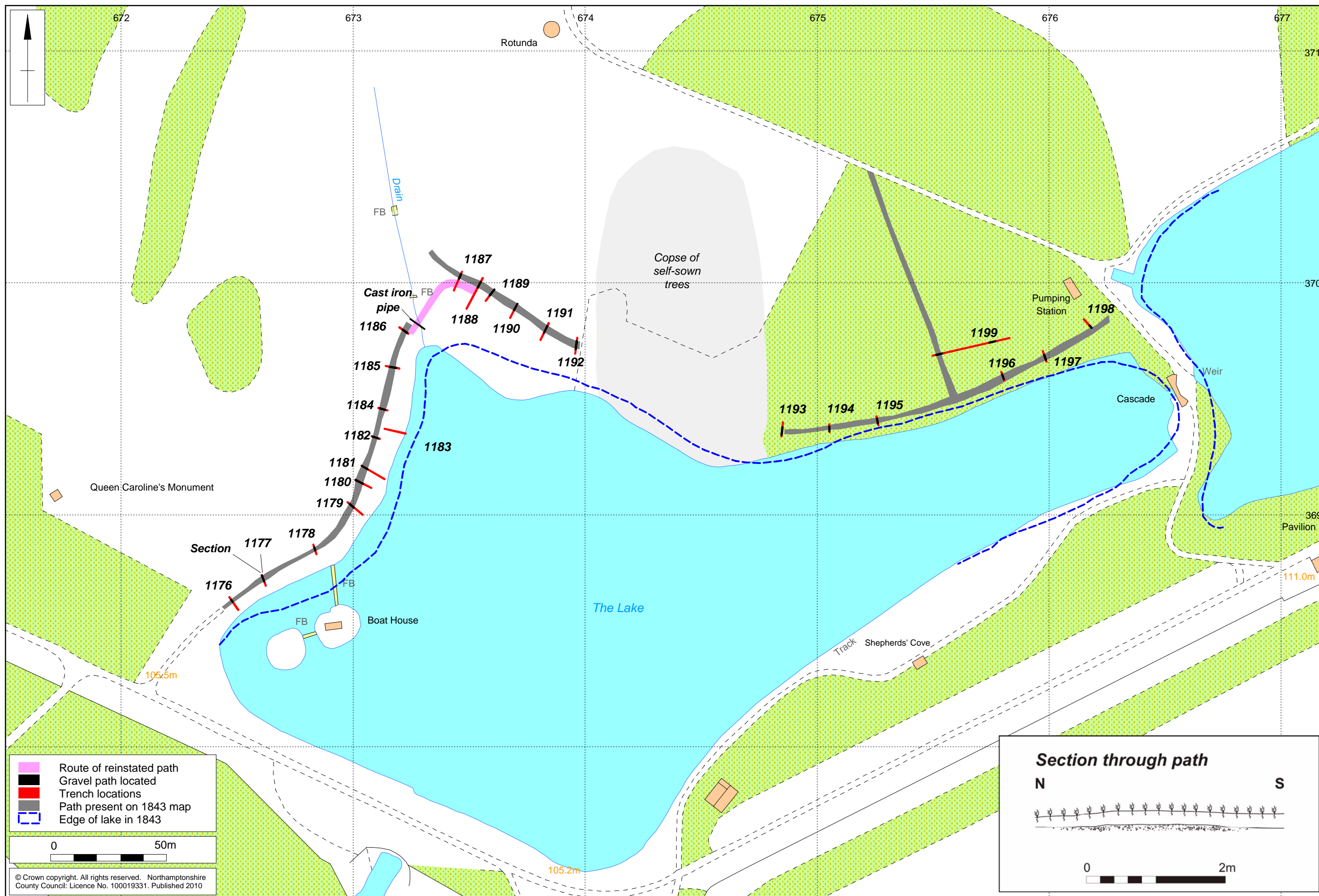
1753 plan of the garden by Benton Seeley Fig 3



1827 plan of the garden by William Smith Fig 4



1843 plan by Henry Howard Fig 5



Scale 1:1500

Stowe, Eleven Acre Lake: location of trenches and section of trench 1177 Fig 6



Trench 1181 (Trench 6), looking north-east Plate 1



Trench 1191 (Trench 16), looking north-west showing limestone blocks with black organic soils

Plate 2



Trench 1195 (Trench 20), looking west Plate 3



Trench 1199 (Trench 24), looking south Plate 4



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