

Whitley House, Four Ash Hill, Baythorne End, Birdbrook. Essex.

Copy of Article in Autumn 2008 Newsletter of the Essex Gardens Trust on the lost garden.

ANOTHER LOST ESSEX GARDEN

By Michael Leach



Engraving of hermitage at Whitley 1803, in Britton & Brayley's *Beauties of Britain*

'Whitley, in the parish of Birdbrook... is the property of Thomas Walford Esq. who has greatly embellished and improved the estate by various plantations, and laying out the grounds in an ornamental style. A screen of firs and forest trees, combined with sycamores, chestnuts, larches &c. extends from the house to a small hill, planted with cedars, cypresses and laurels... At a short distance is a wood of about seven acres, laid out in pleasant walks, and ornamented with various seats and buildings. One of them, called the Hermitage, is most agreeably situated among the trees, and consists of three circular apartments. It is built of ragstone, timber and bark of trees; the whole covered with thatch, paved with pebbles and tiles, and rusticated with moss &c. ...The flower garden comprises a rich and choice assemblage of exotic shrubs and flowers, besides a collection of rare English plants: this spot is decorated with a building, appropriately named the Temple of Flora, and a Summer-house, fancifully ornamented with trellis work.'

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The garden, on the Essex–Cambridge border near Haverhill, has not survived but is known mainly from this description which was printed in Britton and Brayley's *Beauties of Britain: Delineations of Essex*, published in 1803. A very similar account, said to have been written by the owner himself, appears in Thomas Wright's *Essex* nearly three decades later and, even allowing for Walford's self-aggrandisement, it seems to have been a spectacular garden. The house is shown on Chapman and André's map of 1777, surrounded by a tiny garden, but by 1799 the Ordnance Survey surveyors' drawings show a rectangular park, extending about half mile south of the house and enclosing, at its southern end, a wood which had been shown by Chapman and André. This is the only significant wood in the vicinity and must be the one that contained the hermitage. An engraving of this rustic building was included in Britton and Brayley's book of 1803, and the Essex Record Office has a coloured drawing of 1796 by an unknown artist showing the same building. The tithe map surveyed in 1835 shows a similar layout, except that the wood has a semicircular protrusion into the park with a small cottage and garden at its north west corner. The tithe award of 1841 notes that the entire park was still grassland but provides no other useful information. These few fragments are the only sources of information about this short-lived garden, created in the late eighteenth century and lost by 1876 when the first edition of the 6-inch Ordnance Survey map was surveyed. By this time, the site had been sliced open by the deep cutting of the Colne Valley railway (constructed in 1863) and this must have been the *coup de grace* for the park, even if it had survived that long.

Anyone visiting the site today will see nothing of its former glories. It is on a flat plateau of open arable land, gently falling away to the south and east, and many of the field boundaries have been sacrificed to the needs of modern farming. The most striking feature is the heavily wooded and long abandoned cutting of the railway curving across the southern half of the former park. A red brick house, partially hidden behind farm buildings, appears to be of late nineteenth or early twentieth-century date, with a large modern extension; perhaps the

bailiff's house described in the 1912 sales catalogue, but clearly not the one that Thomas Walford had lived in. The only notable feature is a substantial boundary wall along the road, built of flint nodules with random courses of red brick stretchers laid diagonally. This rustic wall might date from the Walford period, though it could be later. The moat remains, now planted as an orchard. Apart from a shattered horse chestnut near the house, there are no signs of any surviving exotic planting. It is also obvious that the construction of the railway, with its deeply excavated cutting, necessitated a significant reorganisation of the nearby roads, with a tell-tale straight and wide length running alongside it, and a neat right-angled junction for the bridge crossing it. An avenue of trees along the new length of road, shown on the 1876 Ordnance Survey map, has disappeared. Walford does not appear to have left any direct heirs. By 1841 the estate was owned by Selby Thomas and in 1869 was bought by Henry Payne. When Payne's executors sold the estate in 1912, it was a working farm with the usual agricultural buildings, 'an excellent site for a residence', a two-up two-down bailiff's house and a pair of labourers' cottages.

Thomas Walford (1752–1833) has proved an elusive character, though he was clearly a country gentleman living on the profits of his estate, fulfilling some of the usual roles expected of a man in his position. He was, for example, an officer in the local militia, and was involved in the Provisional Cavalry, newly established in 1797 to combat the threatened French invasion. His tastes were undoubtedly antiquarian. He made a list of corrections and updates to Morant's *History of Essex* for the neighbouring parishes, and was a keen amateur local archaeologist and a contributor of articles on local Roman sites to the Society of Antiquary's journal, *Archaeologia*. For his time, he was an unusually assiduous recorder, providing (for example) a detailed and accurate plan of a Roman villa at Ridgewell, which was being quarried by its owner for road-making material. His enthusiasm for botany is shown by his election as a fellow of the Linnaean Society, and he contributed an article to their journal on crop damage by wireworm. He was also in correspondence with the botanical

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illustrator, James Sowerby (1757–1822) and is said to have made some contributions to the latter's 36 volumes of *English Botany*. Walford's enthusiasm for this subject is shown in his *Scientific Tourist through England, Wales and Scotland* which includes, inter alia, an exposition on Linnaean classification and a list of rare plants in Essex, some of which he may have collected and grown in his garden at Birdbrook.

This briefest of notes on a lost Essex garden is recorded in the hope that other information may come to light. At Walford's death in 1833 it was noted that his extensive parish history of Birdbrook (with engravings by Strutt) was almost ready for publication, but this manuscript cannot now be traced. Would it, perhaps, have provided more information about this garden and its designer?

Copy of coloured version of Hermitage in Whitley Wood at the Essex Record Office dated 1796.

