



A Brief History of the Manor Gardens



ROTHAMSTED
RESEARCH

The Rothamsted estate was mortgaged, in 1611, by the then owner, Edward Bardolph, to Jacob Wittewronge. Jacob's widow, Anne, bought the property outright in 1623, and it formally passed to their son John in 1639. John Wittewronge (later Sir John) was responsible for the frontage of the manor that we see today, and for the construction of a large walled garden. Sir John had an eventful life but of particular interest is the weather diary that he kept from 1683-1689. In this, he described the weather on a daily basis but also noted what was happening on his farms and in his gardens. These notes create a picture of mature and well-stocked gardens and orchards, with ornamental and formal features but devoted largely to productive plants.

On the death of Sir John Wittewronge, in 1693, Rothamsted passed to his second son, James (1647-1721). He was a reliable and responsible custodian of the property but it is not known whether he had much interest in, or made any changes to, the gardens.

In contrast, Jacob Wittewronge The Younger (Sir John's grandson), who inherited the property in 1721, loved country life and showed considerable interest in the Rothamsted estate. He planted an avenue of elms in front of

the house, many fruit trees, and a large quantity of trees for topiary. Wood walks were cleared and were lined with hornbeam hedges.

Little documentary evidence survives from the late 18th and early 19th centuries but it appears that little changed within the walled garden. The fields to the south and east of the manor were opened-up as parkland.

Sir John Bennet Lawes (1814-1900), the founder of the organisation now known as Rothamsted Research, was directly descended from Sir John Wittewronge. He was born in the manor, and took up permanent residence in 1834. In the 1840s, his wife, Lady Caroline Lawes, painted views that suggest little had changed since the 18th century. In the 1860s, the walled area was reduced by half, formal parterres were laid-out, and also an ornamental woodland of mixed planting. The ornamental ha-ha walls date from this period.

Sir Charles Lawes-Wittewronge (1843-1911) inherited the manor, which included the gardens, in 1900. He undertook changes to the gardens in accordance with his desire to see Rothamsted as a country seat worthy of the Wittewronge pedigree. He added ornamental garden features, including urns, seats, two of his sculptures, and



Receipt for manor gates

Dutch gables to the west wall of the walled garden. The manor woods were replanted and made more formal. To the north of the yew lawn he created a formal orchard.

After the death of Sir Charles, in 1911, the manor and gardens were let, and remained so after the family sold the Rothamsted estate to the Lawes Agricultural Trust in 1934. During the 1939-1945 war, the manor was requisitioned by the army.

Much of the present garden, including the surrounding woodland, occupies some 12 acres, was laid-out in around 1900. It contains a wide variety of planting although over the years many trees have been lost in storms, and the elm avenue succumbed to Dutch elm disease in the 1970s.