

THE HISTORY OF STOWE—I

ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL STOWE

"On the shore where Time casts up its stray wreckage, we gather corks and broken planks, whence much indeed may be argued and more guessed; but what the great ship was that has gone down into the deep, that we shall never see."

These words of G. M. Trevelyan are a salutary reminder to anyone who sets out to write the history of the remote past, but the historian of Stowe needs a further warning. For he is tempted to project Georgian grandeur backwards through time, investing earlier periods with the glamour of Stowe's later fame. When the Temple family had established itself here and was building up its social and political position generation by generation, Stowe too grew in importance, reflecting the increasing prestige of its owners, until in the eighteenth century it was acknowledged as a centre of national politics and the most influential landscape garden in Europe. But before the Temples came, the truth is that it was a mean little place. Situated on the northern fringe of the Hôme Counties and hemmed in between the sour clays of the Ouse valley and the Midland forests, it was of no significance. The relics of its early days may evoke local enthusiasm, but they are of small intrinsic interest, and although their historian must faithfully record them, his real business is rather different. For at Stowe Trevelyan's 'great ship' has not gone down into the deep but is still afloat—looted and somewhat battered, it is true, but easily recognizable and not beyond repair: the eighteenth century house and gardens, with the majority of the temples, are still in existence and still, in their main lines, intact. But precisely how they came into existence is only partially known. Who or what dictated the site of the house, what factors controlled its shape and growth, why the lines of the avenues and walks were laid out as they were and not otherwise, whether their designers imposed these things arbitrarily on the place, or adapted what they found, or were restricted by existing features which could not be altered—these and similar questions are the crucial ones to ask about Stowe, and to attempt an answer to them must be the main task of Stowe's historian.¹

The most pervasive influence on the development of Stowe has been the nature of the soil itself. Not far below the surface lies a bed of oolitic limestone, but on top of this is a mass of debris—sand and gravel, clay and mud—which was deposited unevenly by torrential rivers flowing southwards from the receding ice sheet of the Pleistocene Age and was worn into its present shape by the subsequent action of water. Along the western boundary is a great promontory of gravel, running from the high ground of the North Front down to the Oxford Bridge; another one, rather broader and flatter, runs south to the Octagon. The gravel is often only an inch or two below the surface, so that it grates against the prongs of a fork and moles throw up as much pebble as earth. These two promontories drain easily, except where the ground has been made up, but between them is a basin of thick clay. This area has never been built on, and it was not even included in the formal garden but left as Home Park, an unimproved enclave inside the perimeter walks. Now part of the golf course, it taxes the patience of player and groundsman alike. When a trench was dug from near Chatham House to the marsh, a section of the long slope was exposed about a foot deep; on top was a thin layer of earth, but underneath—apart from two stones—there was nothing but clay. The patchiness of the soil was even more strikingly shown by the three test shafts that were sunk in 1965 on the site of Lytrelton House. Dug within thirty

yards of each other, they all passed through gravel, clay and more gravel; but the belt of clay was encountered at different depths and varied in thickness, and the colour of the gravel differed at opposite ends of the site.

But if the local geology has been a limiting factor on settlement, its variety has provided Stowe's occupiers with plenty of building material. The neighbourhood is dotted with gravel pits, some of them still in use, and abundant clay is available. Within living memory a kiln was operating by the Dadford road not far from Boycott Manor, and the deep gullies near the Oxford Lodge are probably pits from which clay was dug to make bricks. Stone too was conveniently accessible, for where the Stowe streams converge with the Dad brook at the bottom of Paper Mill Hill, the glacial debris has been scoured away and the limestone is exposed. Most of the material for the later building at Stowe came from further afield, but the Boycott quarry was still in use in the nineteenth century and was certainly of reasonable quality, since some of the facing stone for the Corinthian Arch came from it in the 1760's. Timber was also plentiful. The existing woodlands were planted as part of the landscape design, but previously the area must have been covered with forest trees. In 1708–9 Sir Richard Temple sold a lot of timber to Blenheim, and though this did not necessarily come from his estate at Stowe, there is other evidence that it was well wooded. The Boycott wood was explicitly recorded in *Domesday Book*, and Vanbrugh's Pyramid, which stood near the Field Houses, was described as appearing "to great Advantage amongst those venerable oaks." With gravel, clay, stone and wood available inside the parish boundary Stowe's inhabitants had all the essential materials close at hand.²

PREHISTORIC AND ROMAN STOWE

Although the relics of early man are scanty, they are enough to suggest that he moved freely over the well drained uplands north of the Ouse and settled intermittently in the area. A Neolithic axe, made of stone from Great Langdale, has recently come to light at Shalstone, two miles to the south-west; and at Radstone, north of Brackley, aerial photography has revealed a "ring" ditch, which must be a ploughed-up barrow or some sort of enclosure. The nearest evidence on the eastern side is at Foscott, where an Iron Age stone quern of mill-grit was found during work on the new reservoir, and traces of a circular enclosure, probably also of the Iron Age, survive in fields nearby. As a substantial building existed at Foscott during the Roman period, the occupation of the site may have been continuous, but there is no certain evidence. At Stowe itself nothing has turned up, except three flint implements of doubtful authenticity which were found in a gravel pit by the third Duke and have since disappeared.³

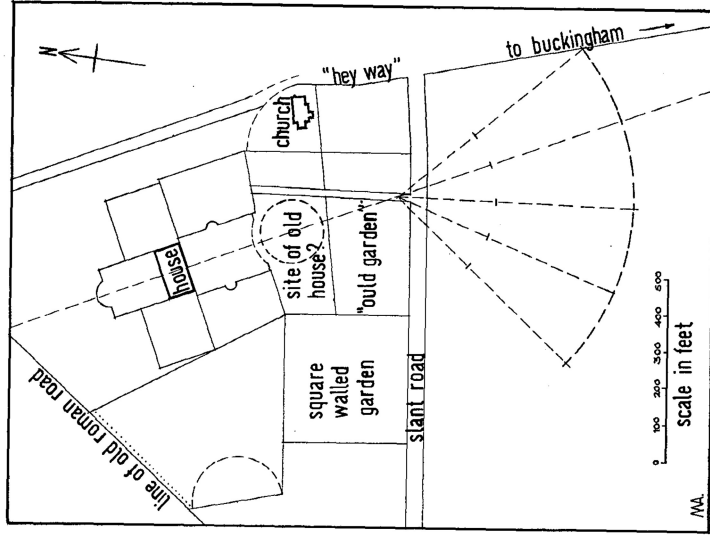
With the Romans firm ground is reached, for certainly one Roman road, and possibly a second, crossed the park. During the years following the occupation in 43 A.D. a network of military roads was built to establish communications and hold down the country. The trunk road from London to the north-west, through St. Albans, Bletchley and Towcester, is still in use as A5 and known by its Saxon name of Watling Street. A secondary road ran north from Dorchester-on-Thames, across Otmoor to Bicester, and thence in a north-easterly direction to join Watling Street at Towcester. Called 'Bogilde Street' by the Saxons—and corrupted to 'Buggerode' by 1500 A.D.—its line is followed by the modern road from Bicester to Fimmere and picked up again through the village of Water Stratford. Until 1939 it was assumed that its northward extension lay along the avenue from the Brackley Lodge and up the main approach drive to Stowe, and this seemed to be confirmed by a coin of Alexander Severus (222–235 A.D.) which was found in a spring near the cross-roads at the Oxford Lodge.

But aerial photography during the War showed that its actual course was parallel to and a little east of this line, along Nelson's Walk and Sequoia Avenue into the field beyond, where it altered course and ran almost due north across Woody Park. This was confirmed in the winter of 1914—5, when the field was deep-ploughed for the first time and the foundation stones of the road broke the plough; and during the summer which followed a swath of dry stone, whitening in the hot sun, lay across the surface of the soil. It seems likely that the Roman army surveyors, realising that the direct route from Bicester to the high ground at Whittlebury would be troublesome, deviated slightly to the east in order to exploit the ford across the Ouse at Water Stratford and the well-drained gravel promontory at Stowe. Once safely up on the plateau they changed direction back again and aligned the next leg on their original target of Whittlebury.

How long this road remained in use no one can say, but like so many Roman roads it provided a convenient demarcation line for later Saxon settlers. Further south it still marks the boundary between parishes and even counties, and garden plans of c.1680, recently found in the Huntington Library, strongly suggest that this was the case here too and that it divided the lands of Stowe from those of Boycott (see plan). The seventeenth century gardens of Sir Richard Temple seem to have extended to the western edge of his property, where his son, Lord Cobham, laid out Nelson's Walk, using the estate boundary as the western perimeter of his enlarged gardens. By purchasing the Boycott estate Cobham was able to make a grand approach to the house further out, planting a double avenue of noble trees and placing the Boycott Pavilions as sentinels at the brow of the hill. Naturally he aligned it parallel to Nelson's Walk and therefore also parallel to the old military road.

The other road is ancient, but there is no clear evidence that it is of Roman origin. In the last twenty years many new settlements of the Roman period, including a religious centre near Thornborough, have been discovered along the upper Ouse valley, and the area must have been more developed than was previously realised. The line of a possible road has been traced from the eastern side of Buckingham to Chackmore and thence to the hill by the Corinthian Arch. Across Stowe Park there is nothing to be seen, but its track has been picked up on the hill west of Dadford and followed past Biddlesden Abbey to High Cross, on the road from Brackley to Towcester. Again the 1680 plans may provide corroborating evidence, for they show that the main approach to Stowe then lay on the eastern side, the 'hey way' from Buckingham running along the edge of the little valley that became the Elysian Fields. This in itself does not prove that it is Roman in origin, but the fact that the mediaeval church is built on the line of the road, which goes round it, perhaps suggests that the road antedated the church and had fallen into disuse at the time the church was built. The inference is that the road is of Roman construction, but the point can only be settled by excavation, and this is a project which could suitably be undertaken by the School Archaeological Society.⁴

There is no other evidence of Roman occupation in the park (the mosaic pavement in the Queen's Temple was brought there from Foscott in 1840), though it is possible that there was a settlement here. Presumably the old tracks led Saxon settlers later to the site, but the essential importance of these two roads for the future development of Stowe is that they governed the width of the eighteenth century gardens. On the west flank, as has been shown, the line of the military road became the perimeter walk; on the east the highway blocked any extension of the garden on that side of the main vista, and until Cobham had built a new approach road elsewhere and could dispense



An estate plan of c. 1680, labelled and redrawn from the original, which is reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California

with the old one, his gardens were bound to be lopsided and asymmetrical. It is an intriguing thought that the 'irregularity' of Stowe's landscape gardens, so much admired and copied in the eighteenth century, may have been dictated by the decisions of Roman surveyors more than fifteen hundred years earlier. But it would be closer to the truth to say that the garden designers, faced with these 'site irregularities', were prompted to think out a novel way of solving their problems. That is how revolutions in taste often come about.

THE SAXON SETTLEMENT

Over a thousand years separated the first Saxon immigrations from the Dissolution of the Monasteries, during which time forty generations lived and died at Stowe. By the end of this period the pattern of settlement is recognizable on a modern map, and about half way through it Domesday Book provides information that will be invaluable when it can be properly analysed. But apart from the Domesday survey the only available facts are a handful of scattered references and the uncertain evidence of place-names. Faced by such dense obscurity over so great a stretch of time, the historian has to fall back on conjecture and must move warily.

By the end of the sixteenth century the parish of 'Stowe cum Membris', as it is called in the parish register, comprised Stowe itself and the hamlets round it: Lamport, Boycott, Dadford and probably most of Luffield. Though there is some hint of a chapel at Dadford, the church—and therefore presumably the parish centre—was always at Stowe. As the present building dates from the thirteenth century, it may have been founded at that time by Oseney Abbey, which owned the whole manor of Stowe and part of Lamport. More probably it was a rebuilding, the previous and much older church being demolished in the process. There is some support for this theory from the place-name. For 'Stowe', in addition to meaning 'place' or 'place of assembly', could also mean 'holy place', in which sense a saint's name was often attached to it (as in 'Felixstowe', for example). So it is possible that the site of the church may already have been regarded for centuries as sacred ground. But it is perhaps more likely that Stowe gained its name as the assembly place for the local district, which was organized as the Hundred of Stodfold in late Saxon times; if Stowe indeed lay by a Roman road junction, it would be a natural meeting place to choose. Close by was Lamport (or Langport), the 'long town' or 'long market', and it could well be that meetings of the hundred merged conveniently into market days. At such a local centre a church would have existed from an early date, and there is no need to assume any particular holiness about the site.

Of the original Saxon settlements there is no trace, but three early settlers or family groups seem to have left their names on the map, at Luffield ('Luffa's Field'), Dadford ('Doddā's Ford') and Boycott ('Boia's Cottage' or 'Shelter'). No doubt Luffa had cleared an open space in the forest north of Black Pit and close to the Roman road, while Doddā's and Boia's settlements were at the side of the river valley, where the gravel meets the clay and there is a line of springs. If, as seems likely, Boycott was near the Oxford Water, both were placed under the lee of a hill which sheltered them from the north-east wind. Much the same factors also governed the position of Stowe, but it was a better site. Clustered round the church the village stood on well drained soil with water available in springs nearby; it was high enough to be clear of the frost pockets and mists of the valleys, while the crest of the hill and a bank of forest trees protected it from the winter wind; the main field lay on the wide, southward-facing slope which runs down to the Octagon.

But although they had a promising site and almost all the raw materials they needed, the Saxon inhabitants must have led a precarious existence. Pestilence and crop failure were a perpetual threat to survival, and the geographical position of Stowe made it vulnerable to attack. For in the conditions of Saxon England no power based on London or the Midlands could exert effective control over this area, with the result that it was exposed to raids from every freebooting warlord; and normal life must have been completely disrupted in the Danish wars of the ninth and tenth centuries, when Stowe lay in no man's land between the Danish fortress at Northampton and the Saxon one at Buckingham. The evidence of Domesday Book shows that this part of Buckinghamshire was impoverished and underpopulated, and implies that it had recently been plundered. When Stowe came into Norman hands it was 'waste'—that is, it had been deliberately devastated. Twenty years later, in 1087, it had partially recovered, but shortage of manpower or draught animals was keeping agricultural production down to 30 per cent. of the estate's capacity. While there is no record of devastation in Lamport or Dadford, and Lamport seems to have suffered little, in 1087 Dadford was even worse off than Stowe, with production down to a mere 25 per cent. Similar disasters must have overtaken Stowe before, but on this occasion it happened that the king's valuation experts assessed and recorded the damage.⁵

THE MIDDLE AGES

After the Norman conquest Stowe had five different owners in about eighty years. The king gave the confiscated manor, like many others in Buckinghamshire, to his half brother, Bishop Odo, and when he quarrelled with Odo, granted it to two of his Norman followers, Richard d'Ivri and Robert d'Oilly. They founded St. George's church in the castle at Oxford and made Stowe part of its endowment. Not long afterwards d'Oilly's grandson gave St. George's and its possessions to the Abbey of Oseney, newly established on the outskirts of Oxford. This succession of absentee landlords cannot have made life easier for the inhabitants of Stowe, but their experience was not untypical. What such estates desperately needed was efficient management and the injection of new capital. So it was probably lucky that Stowe belonged to Oseney for the four centuries from 1149 to the Dissolution, since the abbey was one of the wealthiest and best disciplined of the religious houses in Oxfordshire. During the thirteenth century Oseney ran a banking business in Oxford, investing the depositors' money in house property, and if the abbey lands were managed with the same skill, Stowe and the other estates must have benefited. It was in this century that the present church was built, and improvements are likely to have been made to the rest of the property at about the same time.

But when it comes to details, almost nothing has yet been found out about the place or the people who lived here in the Middle Ages. The worn effigy of a person in civilian dress stands upright outside the south porch of the church; in the chancel is a brass of the mid-fifteenth century to Alice Saundres; and the will of Sir Richard Halley, Vicar of Stowe from 1494 to 1520, was discovered by Brown Willis, the pioneer antiquarian. But apart from these isolated facts nothing has been recorded. It is not even known whether the Black Death had much effect, though the monks at Luffield Abbey are reported to have been wiped out by the pestilence.⁶

In the past year, however, two fresh pieces of evidence have appeared. The library at Stowe contains a manuscript book of some fifty pages, unbound but very well preserved, which was made for Sir Peter Temple in 1633. It is a survey of all his estates and appears to include information collected forty years earlier. In it every parcel of

land is described, with its size and value, and the name of the tenant. At the very least it will reveal the names of people and places. But as leasing arrangements had changed relatively little for several centuries, it should enable scholars to reconstruct many of the details of the mediaeval estate. The other new evidence is the 1680 plan, previously mentioned, which may prove a useful complement to the survey. For on it a hint of the mediaeval lay-out is preserved. If the Restoration house is removed from the top of the plan and the square garden from the left-hand side, the centre of the estate can be stripped of its seventeenth century additions, and what is left is the bones of the earlier lay-out. The slant road leading west from the highway looks like a lane along the top edge of the open fields, and next to the "ould garden" must have stood the old house, which was lived in for a century by the Temple family before being demolished in the 1670's. This house had probably been enlarged and partly rebuilt, but it presumably stood on the site of the mediaeval farmhouse built by Osney Abbey. The question can only be settled by excavation, which the school authorities are not likely to encourage, since the mediaeval foundations, if they exist, must lie under the cricket square on the South Front.

The history of the neighbouring hamlets followed much the same pattern as Stowe's, except for part of Lampport, which had a lay owner throughout the Middle Ages, finally coming into the possession of the Dayrell family, who kept it until the nineteenth century. All the others had monastic landlords. Biddlesden Abbey held the two manors in Dadford and the manor of Boycott; Osney Abbey held the other manor in Lampport, as well as Stowe, and also had some interest in Boycott; Luffield Abbey held Water Stratford. By the fifteenth century all were in decline, and Luffield was in such straits by 1503 that it was handed over to the Abbey of Westminster. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539, when monastic property was nationalized, all but the Dayrells' Lampport estate became crown-land, and much of it was used to endow the new Bishopric of Oxford in 1547. The estate cannot have been very prosperous, and no doubt in the worsening inflation the owners hoped to enclose the fields and convert arable land to pasture; but as most estates were encumbered with long leases, it was a difficult change to make. Only a dynamic man, shrewd and not too scrupulous, could force it through. Such was Peter Temple, an ambitious younger son who had his way to make in the world; he had useful contacts in the wool business and was ready to speculate in land. In 1554 he gained his first foothold in the district by buying some property in Buckingham, and within a generation his family had gained firm possession of Stowe.⁷ G.B.C.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Professor G. M. Trevelyan, Inaugural Lecture (1927); throughout this article use has been made of *Some Notes on the History of Stowe*, an unpublished typescript by G. G. Gilling-Lax in the Library at Stowe.
- ² Stowe building accounts in the Huntington Library; letter of Vanbrugh to his agent at Blenheim; *Dialogue on the Gardens at Stowe* (1748).
- ³ Information from Mr. C. N. Gowing, Curator of the County Museum at Aylesbury; lecture by the third Duke, *Records of Bucks V*.
- ⁴ Information from Mr. C. N. Gowing and Mr. C. W. Green; *Roman Roads in the S.-E. Midlands*, by the Viatores; *Records of Bucks XVII*.
- ⁵ Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *North Buckinghamshire*; E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*; Victoria County History, *Buckinghamshire*.
- ⁶ V.C.H., *Oxfordshire*; V.C.H., *Buckinghamshire*; *Records of Bucks XIII*.
- ⁷ V.C.H., *Buckinghamshire*.

(The second article in the series, on 'The Rise of the Temple Family', will be printed in the July number of 'The Stoc'.)