

A History of the woods and meadows of Gedling House

The history of the site falls into three phases, the wild-wood, the arable field and the designed landscape adorning Gedling House.

The Wild-wood

After the Ice Age, plants re-colonised England before man came. Most of the country eventually became deciduous woodland with trees like oak, ash and elm and the site of Gedling House would have been part of an extensive wild wood that stretched for many miles to the north. There were some places like the flood plain of the Trent valley where trees could not establish themselves as successfully as in the wild wood because the shifting course of the river restricted the growth of all but grass, scrub and marsh plants.

The site of Gedling House would have thus been on the edge of the area of woodland with more open country to the south that formed a corridor from the sea along which the first humans came. When they arrived, they settled on the fertile soils of the flood plain and used the adjacent woodland as a source of timber for building and fuel and as a hunting ground.

Evidence of human habitation in the Trent valley adjacent to the Gedling House site comes from crop-marks detected by aerial photographs and a few archaeological finds. There have been very few archaeological digs in the Trent valley except for rescue operations prior to gravel extraction so there is not much information about the people who lived in the valley immediately adjacent to the site.

The first evidence of people leaving the flood plain in the Gedling area comes from the Iron Age in about 300BC when a hill-fort was established on a promontory overlooking the valley a few hundred metres to the east of the Gedling House site. This was probably a refuge and not intended for permanent occupation but third century pottery and coins have been found there. The Old English name for a fort was a *burgh* so the hill-fort gave rise to the word 'Burton' in Burton Joyce. The name Gedling is Old English also and means 'place of the people of Ged' so both settlements were probably founded in around 600AD by further settlers coming up the Trent; this time Angles from the coast of northern Germany. Evidence of occupation of land to the north of the flood plain comes from a find of pottery burial urns near to the Ouse Dyke in Netherfield. The settlement was probably further up the dyke where Shearing Hill is now.

The Arable Field

The Angles would have been the first people to clear some of the wild wood to make fields but there is no record of how much of it they cleared. The first record giving some idea of the extent of the agricultural land attached to Gedling is the Domesday Book of 1086 which says that there were around 140 acres of arable land at the time.¹ Assuming that such an area was centred on the few houses that would have been situated along the Ouse Dyke near Shearing Hill the arable land would not have extended to much of the site of Gedling House at that time.

The first map showing land use in Gedling was the Sherwood Forest survey map drawn by Richard Bankes in 1609². Forests were hunting grounds set aside for the exclusive use of the monarch and Sherwood Forest extended as far south as the river Trent and was by no means all woodland. It had been little used by 1609 and local landowners had claimed parts of it so Bankes surveyed the area on the orders of James I to establish the validity of these claims. The Gedling area of the map (Figure 1) shows that the only parts of the wild-wood left are several holdings near to Mapperley Plains and East Haw wood on the eastern boundary.³ The site of Gedling House is part of an arable field called the Ratcliffdale field. The population grew only slowly in medieval times so Ratcliffdale field had probably existed for centuries. Land in the common fields was divided into strips five and a half yards wide and around 220 yards long on which villagers grew their food. Each person of a particular rank had the same number of strips, which were distributed randomly throughout the fields so they all had some of the more and less productive land. (Figure 2)

The Nottingham to Newark road.

The road to the south of the site of Gedling House had for centuries been the main road from Nottingham to Newark which passed over Carlton Hill, followed the road to Burton Joyce and then continued along the river bank to Hazelford ferry where it crossed the Trent and joined the Fosse Way. The turnpike road to Newark via Saxondale came into being under Acts of Parliament passed in 1766 and 1772⁴ but the cost of tolls on the new road meant that many people continued to use the old road.

Parliamentary Enclosure

As time went on some individuals who farmed in the arable fields became more prosperous than others and bought additional strips to enlarge their land-holding. Records of the late seventeenth century show that the richest farmers had around ten times as much as the poorest ones. These people grew crops for sale so the cost of production was important to them and travelling between strips became less tolerable. Over a period from around 1750-1850 most parishes in England petitioned parliament for an act to enclose the common land and re-distribute it to create compact fields that could be farmed more effectively. The Gedling Enclosure Act was passed in 1794 and the resulting Award which re-allocated the land was made in 1796.

Gedling House and the designed landscape

There were three gentlemen involved in building and occupying Gedling House; **Thomas Smith**, **Thomas Beaumont** and **William Elliott Stanford**. They were assisted by a landscape designer who was possibly the **Rev. John Swete**. All four of them were related by marriage as shown by the much simplified diagram in Figure 3.

Thomas Smith was a peripheral member of the wealthy Nottingham family who owned Smith's Bank. Their fortunes had been founded in the middle of the seventeenth century by his great grandfather, another Thomas Smith who came to Nottingham from Cropwell Butler as an orphan in the care of his uncle. He was apprenticed as a mercer and later set up a mercer's shop⁵. He soon recognised that he could use the cellar beneath the shop as an alternative source of income by making it more secure and renting space in it for his neighbours to store their valuables; a welcome security in the aftermath of the Civil War. Soon Thomas had moved on to storing money as well as other valuables. He lent out the money he stored at a rate of interest thereby founding the first bank in England outside London⁶.

By the middle of the eighteenth century the Smiths had banks in London as well as Nottingham so several family members lived around London and there must have been considerable movement of family members between Nottingham and London. The Thomas Smith who built Gedling House was born in 1746 the son of John Smith who had left the bank to become a merchant in London. Thomas maintained his connections with Nottingham and returned to marry Mary Bigsby at St Peter's church on June 3rd 1765⁷. He described himself on the licence as a Gentleman. Mary who was 18 at the time, was the eldest daughter of James Bigsby a surgeon of Nottingham.⁸

Thomas and Mary appear to have lived most of the early part of their married life in London but they later spent more time in Nottingham. Thomas had bought land elsewhere in Gedling but was allocated about seventy acres of land in the Ratcliffdale field, by the Gedling Enclosure Award of 1796 on which they built Gedling House shortly afterwards.

The reason the Smiths moved back to Nottingham was probably to support Mary's family. A detailed picture of what happened in Nottingham society is provided by Abigail Gawthern who wrote a diary from 1751-1810. She paints a sad picture of the Bigsby family, recording that Mary's father had died in 1782⁹, her mother in 1795¹⁰ and her brother Rev Jeremiah Bigsby who was rector of St Peter's died in 1797¹¹. Jeremiah's eldest daughter Ann had died in 1786¹², and his daughter Sally died in 1796 at the age of 18,¹³ Her sister Mary Bigsby, is recorded as having died at Gedling on August 2nd 1801¹⁴ so she probably would have been at Gedling House at the time. Abigail Gawthern also describes how Mrs Thomas Bigsby of Derby stayed the night with her in May 1803

and on the following day 'Mrs T Smith fetched her to Gedling'¹⁵. Thomas Smith's ownership of Gedling House came to an end on December 10th 1803 when the estate was offered for sale by auction and was described as having 'several thriving plantations'¹⁶ indicating that the wood had already been planted.

Thomas Beaumont was a member of a wealthy Yorkshire Family and was the son of the Reverend George Beaumont who was Rector of St Nicholas from 1767 to 1773. Thomas followed his father into the church and studied Theology at Cambridge and in 1792 was appointed curate at East Bridgford. Normally a curate is a newly ordained clergyman who is attached to a more experienced one to learn how to conduct himself in parish work before being given a parish of his own but the Rector of East Bridgford, the Rev. Peter Broughton held another parish in Shropshire and lived there. Thomas moved into the Rectory house at East Bridgford and effectively became the rector himself; a situation which gave him such satisfaction that he remained there until he died in 1835¹⁷. There was always the chance that Rev. Broughton may return or be replaced so Thomas immediately set about building a house of his own next to the Rectory. He built a new house called Bridgford Hill House which he designed himself with the help of James Paine the younger whose father was a noted designer of country houses¹⁸. The house had a fashionable bow-fronted bay in the centre of the north elevation to take advantage of the views across the Trent valley. Bridgford Hill House still exists and can be seen at the top of the hill on the left immediately after crossing Gunthorpe Bridge going towards Bingham.

Gedling House and its Landscape

Thomas Smith must have admired Thomas Beaumont's house because he copied the design and added a third floor when he built Gedling House. (Figure 4) The location of the house within the plot of land demonstrates the extent to which the whole landscape was designed to show off Thomas' wealth to best advantage. Had he wanted a good view across the Trent valley like Thomas Beaumont, he would have placed the house at the top of the hill on the north edge of the site. For convenient access to the village he would have placed it at the western end of the site and for convenient access to the Nottingham to Newark road he would have placed it near the southern boundary. Instead he placed the house at the eastern end of the site to provide the maximum length of drive to impress his visitors as much as possible as they approached in their carriages. The means of providing a good impression was to transform the former arable field into parkland. A wood was planted at the top of the slope to obscure the northern boundary and the ridge. It was just sufficiently wide to prevent light showing through the trees. The edge of the wood comprised a series of curves so that there was no point on which anyone could focus and form an estimate of how far it stretched. The regular pattern of the strips left by the arable field was destroyed by ploughing across the slope and the area was sown with grass to enhance the feeling of spaciousness. The grass would probably have been grazed by sheep to keep it looking uniform over the whole area and would have a few isolated trees to punctuate the view. The boundary of the east end of the wood curved back to the drive so that travellers arrived at the house without seeing the extent of the meadow.

An enlarged hedge of trees was planted along the south side of the drive to prevent visitors from looking towards the Newark road and directing their attention towards the wood and meadow. The house was displayed to passers-by on the Newark road by raising it above the intervening field on a terrace and painting it white. It was placed in the centre of the view from the road and a narrow belt of trees was planted to mark the road boundary but still allow a view of the house. (Figure 5). The person who designed this landscape must have been familiar with contemporary trends in landscape gardening of which the leading exponent at the time was Humphry Repton who wrote books on the subject which were published between 1795 and 1816.¹⁹ Repton himself worked on much larger projects such as Thoresby Park and Welbeck Abbey and the Gedling House project would have been too small for him. Thomas Beaumont's brother-in-law **Rev. John Swete** who designed his own house and grounds at Oxtou House near Exeter with a wood surrounding a meadow similar to

the one at Gedling and also painted at least one water colour of Gedling House²⁰ is a likely candidate.

William Elliott Stanford was born in Brewhouse Yard in a poor part of Nottingham the son of a supplier of yarn to the stocking industry. His father had married Ann Elliott in 1751 so he gave William a second name 'Elliott'. William was apprenticed to his mother's brother William Elliott, who had developed a superior technique for dying and finishing black stockings. The Stanford family prospered and in 1775 they were able to buy number 19 Castlegate in Nottingham and set about rebuilding it as Stanford House; making it one of the finest houses in Nottingham²¹. In 1788 William Stanford married Frances Beaumont, the sister of the Rev. Thomas Beaumont who also lived on Castlegate. When William's uncle, William Elliott died in 1792 he left his considerable wealth to the Stanford family on condition that they changed his surname from Stanford to 'Elliott' to prevent the Elliott name from dying out. William Elliott Stanford thus became William Elliott Elliott²².

When Gedling House was sold by Thomas Smith in 1803, the purchaser was Thomas Beaumont who probably used family money so that he could obtain it in trust for his brother-in-law William Elliott Elliott. William bought the house from Thomas Beaumont on March 27th 1804²³ and remained at Gedling House until he died in 1847 when it passed to his sister's son, William Stanford Burnside. It was thus the Elliotts and the Burnsides who started life in Brewhouse Yard that watched the saplings on the hill grow to maturity rather than the gentlemen of the Smith family. William Stanford Burnside died in 1870 and the house passed to his grandson William Elliott Burnside who lived at Gedling House until 1904 when it passed to the Rawnsley family of Well Vale, Alford, Lincolnshire.

The Rawnsleys let it to various tenants and sold the House to the War Office in 1954 who sold it to the Nottinghamshire County Council in 1966. The house and the estate changed little until 1954 when many of the beech and elm trees were felled under a licence that required the land to be restocked with similar trees. No replacement trees were planted. The wood and meadow were sold to the Carlton Urban District Council (forerunners of Gedling Borough Council) in December 1955.

The Tower

A rather indistinct image of a painting entitled *Seat of W. E. Elliott Esq.* by an unknown artist, (Figure 6), and another by Rev John Swete of the Stoke windmill with Gedling House in the background both show a tower at the top of the hill behind the house apparently at the edge of the wood. Neither show the tower in much detail but it is mentioned in a guide to walks in the Nottingham area dated 1835²⁴. No such tower is visible on Sanderson's map of 1835²⁵. The tower may have been built by William Elliott Elliott following the one built by his uncle at Radford Folly²⁶ Abigail Gawthern noted that the Elliotts had 'much improved the house garden and grounds' when she visited them in 1806²⁷ but she gives no indication of what the improvements were. No other documentation on this tower has yet been found but traces of a stone wall that may have supported the platform on which the tower stood can still be seen at the edge of the wood near the highest point of the meadow.

Conclusion

The site of Gedling House Wood and the associated meadow was cleared from the wild-wood in medieval times and has been managed by man ever since; firstly as a commonly held arable field and later as the landscaped background to a gentleman's estate. In the last few decades nature has been allowed to take its course and the site is starting the long journey back to being a wild-wood again.

Recommendation

Investigate the apparent foundation of the tower.

Ted White November 2006

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- ³ Stephanos Mastoris and Sue Groves, *Sherwood Forest in 1609, A Crown Survey by Richard Bankes*, Thoroton Record Series Vol. XL, (1998), Map 9
- ⁴ Arthur Cossons, *The Turnpike roads of Nottinghamshire*, (1934), 39
- ⁵ Thomas Bailey, *Annals of Nottinghamshire*, (1853), Vol 3, 860
- ⁶ J Holland Walker, *An Itinerary of Nottingham, Transactions of the Thoroton Society, Vol XXXVII*, (1937), 3
- ⁷ W. P. W. Phillimore and James Ward (eds.), *Nottinghamshire Parish Registers, Marriages, St Peters Church, 1572-1812*, (1901), 160
- ⁸ T. M. Blagg (ed.), *Abstracts of Marriage Licence Bonds for the Archdeaconry of Nottingham from 1754 to 1770, Thoroton Record Series, Vol. X, Part I*, (1947), 157
- ⁹ Adrian Henstock, (ed.), *The Diary of Abigail Gawthern of Nottingham 1751–1810*, Thoroton Record Series Vol. XXXIII, (1980), 40
- ¹⁰ Adrian Henstock, (ed.), *Abigail Gawthern*, (1980), 62
- ¹¹ Adrian Henstock, (ed.), *Abigail Gawthern*, (1980), 69
- ¹² Adrian Henstock, (ed.), *Abigail Gawthern*, (1980), 44
- ¹³ Adrian Henstock, (ed.), *Abigail Gawthern*, (1980), 67
- ¹⁴ Gedling Burial Register
- ¹⁵ Adrian Henstock, (ed.), *Abigail Gawthern*, (1980), 100
- ¹⁶ Torven Zeffertt, *The Development of and Influences on a Georgian Country Mansion and Estate, 1790-1850, Gedling House, Gedling, Nottingham*, (1995), Appendix Four
- ¹⁷ Rev Arthur de Boulay Hill, *East Bridgford Notts, The story of an English Village*, (1932), 96
- ¹⁸ Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Nottinghamshire*, (1979), 113
- ¹⁹ J C Loudon (ed), *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the late Humphry Repton*, (1840) - reprinted 1969
- ²⁰ Torven Zeffertt, *Gedling House*, (1995), Figure 4
- ²¹ Torven Zeffertt, *Gedling House*, (1995), 50
- ²² Torven Zeffertt, *Gedling House*, (1995), 20-21
- ²³ Charles Gerring, *A History of the Parish of Gedling in the County of Nottingham*, (1908), 165
- ²⁴ Torven Zeffertt, *Gedling House*, (1995), 74
- ²⁵ George Sanderson, *Map of the Country Twenty Miles round Mansfield*, (1835), reprinted 2001 by Nottinghamshire County Council, Map 2-35
- ²⁶ Torven Zeffertt, *Gedling House*, (1995), 75
- ²⁷ Adrian Henstock, (ed.), *Abigail Gawthern*, (1980), 123