

Middleton Hall Gardens

BACKGROUND

Middleton Hall has a special place in the history of our understanding of plants. It was the home of Francis Willughby, the naturalist – an original Fellow of the Royal Society – and it was here that he brought his teacher and friend, the first great English naturalist, John Ray. Ray compiled his *Catalogus Angliae* here, one of the first attempts at a comprehensive listing of British plants. It was here also that Willughby and Ray studied the movement of sap in trees for the first time.

We may expect therefore that some of this heritage has influenced the gardens at Middleton, which are now so popular with our visitors, but sadly there appears to be little connection, other than the tenuous one that the garden was constructed during the tenure of Francis Willughby's son, Thomas – the first Lord Middleton.

Francis Willughby died at the age of 36, in his will making Ray the guardian of his three children, Francis, Cassandra and Thomas. The arrangement did not last long, for it did not please Willughby's widow or her second husband.

The children were 4 years, 2 years and less than one year old when their father died and 8, 6 and 4 when they ceased to come under the influence of John Ray and since the eldest died before he was twenty the residual effect of their father and their guardian can have been but slight. However, Cassandra, in particular, went on to make a

significant contribution to English gardens. This was not to be at Middleton.

Before he died, Francis, the son, had taken up residence at the house that the first Francis, his great-great-grandfather, had built at Wollaton near Nottingham. It had fallen into disrepair following a fire in 1640 and Middleton had been the principal home of the family for two generations. Francis asked his sister, Cassandra to come to keep house for him and it turned out that she was an excellent organiser and she undertook the restoration of Wollaton and began the task of creating impressive gardens at Wollaton



Engraving of Wollaton Hall, 1707 (Kip & Kneller from Britannia Illustrata)

We know what these looked like from the near-contemporary engraving shown here. Cassandra kept a

journal, from which we know that her main interest was in visiting the renowned gardens of her time. She records visiting the house at Middleton only once and that was in order to take away the good furniture to Wollaton. Having acquired a reputation as an excellent housekeeper she went on to create a garden that was famous in her time at a house called Canons, which was at Edgeware in London. There is now a park where the garden was, but the house has long gone. This came about because her first cousin, James Brydges' wife died and he had two young sons in need of a mother. Brydges turned to his cousin, who wrote at the time that she was not marrying out of love but because it was time she did something for other people. This did not interfere with her principal interest, the creation of a fine garden, although in the way of that time it was her husband who got the credit.

Godfrey Kneller
James Brydges (later 1st Duke of Chandos) and his Family. (c.1710)



Probable wedding portrait of Cassandra and James.

After Francis, the son, died his young brother Thomas had moved in with Cassandra at Wollaton and this continued until Thomas married Elizabeth Rothwell. In 1712 Thomas became the first Lord Middleton. He took the name Middleton because there was already a Lord Willoughby and because it was the place of his birth. As the named location it was clearly necessary to gentrify the place, although he never used it as his principal residence. He built the Georgian West Wing, replaced the south wing with a service wing that was used by the staff in residence and had the buildings that dated from 1285, 1530 and 1650 rendered with a cement render to Georgianise them to tone-in with the new west wing. He also replaced the gallery that had connected the Great Hall with the North Front with an extension to the Tudor Great hall that made space for the obligatory double staircase.

More importantly for our story he created a produce garden, sized to be adequate to supply a house that he would visit only rarely. The garden is quite small for this type of structure, given the status of the owner. It is actually two gardens. The small walled garden was probably a herb garden and its configuration alongside the larger walled garden is an economic solution to the problem of maintaining a heated greenhouse and a warm-earth vegetable patch. If the greenhouse had been south facing, but at the north wall of the large garden, the heat in the wall would have been wasted. By locating the greenhouse in a small garden to the south of the main area, a heated greenhouse could also warm the soil in the main garden.



In the picture above, taken from Google Earth, north is upwards. At the bottom is the coachhouse and coachyard. Above are buildings that include a smithy and the bothys that would have been the workplaces and housing for the labourers on the site. Above the bothys is the small walled garden, with greenhouses along its northern wall, on the other side of which we now have flower beds and a lawn. There is then a pergola and the main diagonalised square of the cottage garden layout that now exists.

The wall between the small and large walled gardens is

hollow and would originally have had a fire built into it and would have had a chimney coming out of its western end.

We know something of what it was like at the end of the Victorian era from the record given to us by a granddaughter of the last tenant of the Lords Middleton.

Mrs E.I. March wrote, "My earliest memories are of the gardens and walking round with my grandmother. She took a keen interest in gardening herself and knew Gertrude Jekyll and I used to hear a lot about her too. A mown grass walk led from the conservatory right down to a pond with wide flower borders on each side which made a lovely vista with water at the end."

The walled garden was full of fruit trees, free standing and against the walls and the beds full of vegetables. There were big greenhouses in the middle of the garden and stove houses along the walls leading to the stables. They were especially exciting to me, full of exotic ferns and plants needing a lot of heat and I loved the hot steamy atmosphere. Between the stables and the house was a shrubbery with lilies of the valley which I was allowed to pick without permission, as I was nasturtiums and sweet peas".

Evidently the fact that lilies of the valley are poisonous did not cause the young lady any harm. She wrote this long after the time she is reporting.



The conservatory mentioned by Mrs March was outside the walled garden near to the large cedar (a deodar) that is still there. Its foundations remain. In the picture Mrs March's grandfather, Ecgbert de Hamel, is seen introducing his assembled friends to a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado. (The picture was taken by members of the Sutton Coldfield Photographic Society, which often took photographs at the hall, led by their founder, Sir Benjamin Stone).

Inside the walled garden, the greenhouses were there until the Trust was formed. In the time of de Hamel's tenancy, which ended in 1925 they would have provided produce for

the household. After the Hall was sold to John Averill they were operated commercially. Averill was a businessman who lived off his properties. He and his family lived at the Hall but he also owned a number of farms around the country, one I Evesham, another in Bishop's Castle and several on the extensive estate that he had purchased from Lord Middleton. The derelict remains of his greenhouses were in the garden when the Trust was formed in 1980.



The walled garden is dated to the period when Thomas Willoughby became the first Lord Middleton by the type and arrangement of the bricks forming the wall. There are a variety of possible arrangements, called 'bonds'. Here it is the 'English Garden wall-bond', which is a fairly irregular pattern used when bricks were hand-made and rather variable. These bricks would have been made on site and

are thinner and narrower than the later machine-made bricks.



Brick arrangement in the garden wall.

In the north-east corner there is a gazebo. There is a story that this was where the ladies were parked when the men went hunting, but this is unlikely to be true. It is of later construction than the main wall, almost certainly nineteenth century. By this time the Willoughby family no longer used the Hall. It was tenanted and in about 1850 one of the tenants – John Peel, cousin of Sir Robert Peel – had the deer removed from the park. However the upstairs room of the gazebo would have been a good place from which to gaze out over the park and the pool, as well as the garden. It is probable that the ground floor was used for storage of garden materials. In de Hamel's time it was not a very pretty building, as can be seen from another early photograph.



The gazebo, at centre-left has a flat roof in this c19 picture. It was probably John Averill who added the pitched roof that we know today.

REDEVELOPMENT BY MIDDLETON HALL TRUST

When the Middleton Hall Trust was formed in 1980, the large walled garden was overgrown with weeds. A boiler house and greenhouse containing a vine was in the centre of the garden and an old cold frame was near the west wall. The flues from the boiler house ran underground to the south wall, thus heating it through a serpentine chimney within the thickness of the wall. The greenhouse and the boiler house were taken down and the vine was re-planted against the south-facing wall.

During 1983/4 the invasive weeds were cleared and unwanted trees were cut down. Manpower Services provided some labour for clearance of the site.



A period design (c.1700) was commissioned from Susan Campbell and Jenny Hook and the garden was laid out with footpaths for visitors and raised beds were laid out in the small walled garden.



The Small Walled Garden

The Birmingham Dahlia Society provided over 700 tubers to fill the centre beds in the large walled garden and the following year chrysanthemums were added with the help of Woolman's Nursery. For several years these provided a blaze of colour.

By 1993 a small group of gardening volunteers had been formed. The new group concentrated on the walled gardens and began the task of re-planting. The chrysanthemums and dahlias were past their best and were cleared and the garden turned over to herbaceous plants to give as long a flowering season as possible.



The eight triangular beds each viewed from the centre.
North at top,

The following year a colour scheme was created, which gave the front beds cool colours – whites, pale pinks and blues, followed by deeper pinks and purples and finally hot colours of bright yellows, oranges and reds.



The Pergola

In the summer of 1995, new fine gravel paths were laid. A wooden pergola, the width of the garden, was constructed near the entrance by the Trust's voluntary team of craftsmen. It was paid for by a very generous bequest and positioned so that visitors would enter the pergola before seeing the whole garden. It is now almost completely covered with white wisteria and pale and deep pink roses. Clematis adds colour in spring and autumn and white jasmine scents the air in late summer.

With much generosity and hard work from members and volunteers, the garden is a place of beauty, which gives pleasure to many people.

THE FRUIT TREES

The three gnarled old fruit trees near the entrance to the large walled garden are all that remains to indicate the main function of the area in days gone by. The fruit trees growing against the walls were planted in the 1990's and add interest and structure to the garden



Black Mulberry

On the sunny south facing wall (at the far end opposite the pergola), is a peach (Rochester) and an apricot (Moor Park), both fan trained. Two cordon apples are against the west-facing wall (Laxton Superb and Sunset), an espalier pear (Doyenne de Comice) on the shadier and colder east facing wall and a Morello cherry on the coldest north wall.

THE SMALL WALLED GARDEN

The small walled garden is going through a transition stage.

A central bed of herbs and a more formal scheme is being developed to fit with the idea of a tranquil place in the style of a 'mediaeval' garden. The beds have a permanent mixture of herbs and herbaceous planting plus a show of bulbs throughout the season. The scheme, where possible, includes many varieties of plant that were grown during the medieval period. The central bed is dedicated to John Ray the 'Father of English Botany' who lived at the Hall in the 17th Century and who described and classified plants in a system that substantially survived until DNA classification became possible. The planting in this bed includes plants found by Ray and plants that were grown in gardens during the 1600's.

OTHER PLANTED AREAS AT MIDDLETON

The Sunken Garden is a very difficult area, once part of the moat; it is frequently flooded. The area is planted with moisture-loving plants and has something of interest all year round.

The borders around the hall are planted with herbaceous plants and shrubs and there is always a floral display in tubs, planters and hanging baskets throughout the season. Take a close look at the topiary in the walled garden! Can you tell what it is yet!

THE FUTURE OF THE GARDENS

The gardens are continually changing. Many of our regular visitors enjoy seeing the varied and sometimes unusual plants. Many visitors too, comment on the 'peaceful and magical' atmosphere of the gardens.