

New Discoveries at Kings Weston

In the last Bulletin it was announced that documents had been uncovered that were shedding new light on the development of the Kings Weston landscape in the 18th Century. This large archive of material had been preserved with the descendants of the Southwell Family, the Lords de Clifford, and was held by John Southwell Russell, the 27th Lord de Clifford. We are delighted to say that, following the Kings Weston Action Group's request to study the collection, Lord de Clifford asked whether the group could organise for the whole archive to be transferred to the Bristol Record Office. This has now been undertaken and although it won't be immediately available for public inspection the Record Office is looking at its cataloguing as a priority.

KWAG were fortunate in having access to all of the material before it was transferred to the BRO and there is a great deal of interest to anyone with a curiosity in the history of the Kings Weston estate. Perhaps most significant among the thousands of papers has been a collection of several hundred personal letters collected by Edward Southwell (1738-1777), later the 21st Baron de Clifford, which were sent to him by his mother Katherine. Katherine Southwell, whose portrait by Allan Ramsay still hangs in Kings Weston House, was a prolific letter writer. The collection covers much of the period between 1749 and 1762 including her son's three year Grand Tour and his efforts to build himself a political and personal reputation on his return. They also paint a vivid picture of the genuine maternal affection between the two.

One of the earliest letters was written on 8th July 1749 when Edward Southwell II was just 11. His parents had embarked on an inspection of the family's Irish estates and Katherine ensured her son was kept updated and entertained by their progress. From Downpatrick she wrote:



Peggy Sternbridge

"Mr, Trotter has planted a Grove, which, when grown will be, very pretty, in the middle of it is the statue of Jupiter which went from King's Weston, who is now called St. Patrick, and together with his companion Vesta, now St. Bridget is had in great veneration by the poor Irish who rub their beads and say their Avemarias before them".

A statue of Hercules at Kings Weston is well documented, and considered to be the same one now in the gardens of Goldney House, but what is evident from this letter is that there must have been a more extensive scheme of statuary, some of which was disposed of within thirty years of Sir John Vanbrugh's garden embellishments having been completed. The reasons for this are not clear.

The statue of Hercules vanished from the estate at some time between 1746 and the early 1760s but is first recorded at Goldney later that decade. From Katherine's letters we also learn that the Great Court in which Hercules stood was dismantled in August 1762 shortly after Edward Southwell's return from the Grand Tour. Evidently the existing gardens were outdated and his remodelling coincides with his soaring social and political aspirations. If the Downpatrick statues were further works attributable to John Nost, as the Goldney example is, we shall never know as no trace of them exists today.

Edward Southwell's interest in his park and gardens was evident already in 1755. As he undertook a tour of the UK, a traditional precursor to the rigours of the Grand Tour, letters from Katherine keep him comforted that his new plantations were safe from frost and notes his 'commissions' directed to her and Mr Nicholls, the Estate's agent, are being carried out. After 1758, and throughout his Grand Tour too, there are regular directions being sent back and plans being exchanged by post. Katherine describes a plantation at Kings Weston that her son had planted before his departure: *"your serpentine plantation at the bottom of Penpole, looks much less like a snake than it used to do"*. In a letter of 1759 Katherine explains that the head gardener, Mr Gould (*"Gould and I are such, dear friends as you would think scarce possible between Scotch and English"*) has proposed new designs that she clearly knew would fall short of her son's ambitions. She mentions too that Mr Nicholls had begun sourcing local clay for bricks for future use in a kitchen garden. Mentions of tulip trees, arbutus and many other species also add to our knowledge of what was being grown in the park.

Perhaps the most important discovery made from studying Katherine's letters is the definite involvement of Thomas Wright in the designs of the gardens at Kings Weston. Within a month of his return from Europe Edward Southwell was already in contact with Wright and had invited him to the estate. On the 8th April Katherine wrote from her home at Westhorpe *"I wish I could see your new designs with Wright but you will tell them me and they will shew better when executed"* and just two days later wrote again *"I am glad you are agreeably detained and that Mr. Wright and you have not quarrelled. He must be a very odd creature for he has refused very advantageous offers from Lord Halifax, to go with him to Ireland and prefers liberty tho' joined to poverty. I don't blame him for I think I shou'd do the same"*.

Katherine's later letters suggest a close friendship developed between her son and the Wrights. Katherine mentions a number of meetings in 1761 and 1762 and she even entertains Thomas and his wife in London when they are in town. Katherine's correspondence, found in the archive, finishes in September 1762, just as they begin to fill with detail of the present walled kitchen gardens being constructed; *"I honour your spirit and resolution, that has carried your walls up against all your ministry, but know that from this time forward you'll be charged with every blight that falls on your trees and must never complain of unripe fruit, or backward pease, without being told you wou'd have the walls so high no sun can come into your garden."*

Wright re-enters the Kings Weston story more than a decade later in 1776. A single letter in his own hand, and preserved at Badminton, notes his return to Kings Weston and that *"the place in general greatly improv'd"* but *"wants much yet to be done"*. He makes no hint of his authorship, only that he has already discussed alterations with Mr Southwell and *"some more remarks may take place"*.

Sadly there is no mention of what specific works were undertaken by Wright on the estate and with Edward Southwell's obvious involvement and ability there is likely to be as much by his hand as by Wright's. Perhaps it might be fair to consider Kings Weston as a partnership by these two men? However there are several features at Kings Weston depicted on a 1772 estate plan that KWAG have tentatively attributed to Wright before now. The Quarry Garden, woodland seats, serpentine paths and a viewing mound are features either documented or extant that have precedents in Wrights canon. With a documented chronology of at least some of his time at Kings Weston, and knowledge of the close relationship with his client, we have a concrete justification to add Kings Weston as another Thomas Wright landscape.

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