Kings Weston
New insights on old views
David Martyn

Natural topography and strong commercial interest in shipping led the houses and parks of the Bristol region to have many viewing towers, terraces, platforms, mounds, banqueting houses, and manifold other designed vantage points.

The Kings Weston estate north of Bristol, with its prime location overlooking both the River Severn and Avon had more than its fair share of these. This article hopes shed light on several such features that have otherwise been overlooked. It also seeks to build on James Russell’s published research at Kings Weston, and present new findings which add considerably to the overall importance of this historic landscape.

Fig. 1 Jan Kip, view of Kings Weston from the east showing the earlier manor house and the prospect that was enjoyed from it across the Severn
However marred the views from the estate by industrial Avonmouth today, the visitor to Kings Weston can still remark on the extensive prospect out across the Severn towards the 'The Silurian Alps' of Wales. It should be remembered that this was just one of the notable views with others of national fame now lost to nature and ill-conceived planting.

We start with the well-known engraving by Jan Kip of the estate in about 1710 illustrating Kings Weston from a slightly elevated perspective and before the reconstruction of the earlier manor house (Fig. 1). It shows ships moored out in King Road awaiting a provident wind and tide to carry them up the Avon to Bristol docks and the wide prospects that were once enjoyed from the house. In the distance is the stone compass dial on the common land at Penpole Point used by the Merchant Venturers as a navigation mark, but of particular interest to us in this view is the small banqueting house to the north of the house (Fig 2). It is this structure that is the first feature we shall consider.

The banqueting must have been amongst the first architectural projects of Edward Southwell who had inherited Kings Weston from his father Sir Robert in 1703. The building shown by Kip is a small rectangular structure with a pyramidal roof, a central door and a pair of tall windows overlooking an alley or bowling green to the south east. A drawing from the Kings Weston Book of Drawings dates the building to 1707 and "built after the model of the Duke of Ormonde at Richmond". The Duke of Ormonde, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, had acquired the Richmond Lodge estate in 1702 and a painting exists of an almost identical brick-built pavilion there adjoining a short terrace overlooking the Thames. Although the Kings Weston building was demolished in recent decades after falling into dereliction after the Second World War there are vestigial remains that show it too was built of and dressed with well carved limestone quoins.

The tentative suggestion is made here that both buildings may have been by the Irish architect William Robinson. In their positions as Secretaries to Ireland the Southwells would have known Robinson, the Surveyor General of Ireland, very well. The Duke of Ormonde, had commissioned several monumental projects from the architect, perhaps also including the house at Richmond Lodge itself, and there are stylistic similarities between a number of Robinson's projects and these small garden buildings.

Rather than the river traffic of the Thames the Kings Weston banqueting house enjoyed views northwards over the wide 'Severn Sea'. The prospects were further enhanced by the building's elevated position. It took advantage of the steeply shelving site by being built out over a tall basement of almost two storeys, but with the original banqueting room accessed from the upper storey at the same level as the main house. The present building on the same site today approximates the form and structure of the earlier building.

Sir Emanuel Moore, Edward Southwell's cousin by marriage, wrote in April 1711 "I was the other day at King's Weston, and took Bragadier Gore to show him the place. He is mightily delighted with the situation of the Banqueting House, which commanded a most glorious prospect, the owners of the ships then in the Road being on board drinking like merry fellows, and firing guns. I treated the Bragadier to some of your claret, which was very good".

Posteriorly does not record Southwell's views on his claret being purloined, but it does vividly illustrate the obvious delight the scene inspired.

Edward Southwell's architectural exploits did not end with his banqueting house. An orangery depicted by Kip and in the same style must be of a similar date, but it was the complete reconstruction of Kings Weston House that next focussed his attentions.

He commissioned Sir John Vanbrugh, the Comptroller of the Royal Works, then still in his ascendance, to reconstruct the new building. Construction began on 16th June 1712 on a scheme that Vanbrugh referred to as "your chateau" to his client. Indeed the building had a formidable martial feel in common with the 'castle air' he aspired to for many of his buildings.

The castle analogy did not stop at the distinctive castellated chimney arcades and stark unornamented towers; from the very start Vanbrugh's ambition was to incorporate the wider landscape into his vision. The Great Court, planned in 1717, was proposed to have a defensive ditch and machicolated gateway to it; but earlier, in 1713, another feature was already on the drawing board.

In December that year Vanbrugh wrote to Southwell, "I see no harm in using the Vault under your Bedchamber for a present Kitchen tho' I hope you will let the offices be built after the last Design. At least I must own the more I think of them, the more I am of opinion they will do best that way, especially now you come into the notion of improving the Terrace all that may be."
of the uppermost one as Vanbrugh was keen to impress in his letter. The larger of the terraces connects directly with the banqueting house and is shown with steep battered sides and coloured green. Where the terraces meet the point of symmetry of the Sea Front of the house the width of the terrace is further extended into the landscape creating the effect of a podium when viewed from below.

The scale of these works should not be underestimated. The present terrace outside the vaulted tea rooms at Kings Weston was only built after 1851 and does not project into the landscape as keenly as Vanbrugh’s proposals. To best judge the impact and scale it is appropriate to refer back to the north-facing front of the banqueting house, as it is the same alignment that the new terrace was to share (Fig. 4). The terraces are also a feature of William Haile’s estate survey of 1720 (Fig. 5) and they are shown stretching unbroken from the banqueting house across the whole escarpment as far as Penpole Wood, with the alignment continuing with an avenue adjacent to the main carriage drive. In total this elevated promenade stretched for over 350 metres. As the house neared completion Edward Southwell and Vanbrugh had accelerated their ambitions to ornament the park. One of the first new additions was the attachment of a new entrance to the side of the banqueting house, the Loggia, which would turn the alignment of the old building through ninety degrees. In 1719 the banqueting house was already being referred to as the Billiard Room, but Vanbrugh had been working on designs in the previous year to improve its relationship with the dramatic new terrace, and provide it with a fitting architectural end-stop. In 1719 Edward Southwell was still having difficulty in reconciling the terrace and loggia design with the geometry of the old building stating, “You will perceive that the tarras and billiard room do not run square.”

To help explain the impact of the great terrace and its environs to a modern audience the Kings Weston Action Group began a 3D computer model, but this was quickly rendered superfluous with the discovery of a monochrome watercolour painting of the exact same scene (Fig. 6). Fortunately the painting confirmed the features that the other evidence had so far only suggested. The painting dates to between 1760 and 1768 though as yet remains unattributed. It is painted from the front of the Loggia taking in the broad panorama between the house and King Road and shows the terraces intimated in the earlier plan.
The terrace was finished in turf rather than masonry, with steep sides and sharp crisp angles. Without no parapet or protection from falling, it must also have represented something of a hazard, and how it was maintained is impossible to say, but these may have been factors behind its removal as well as changing fashions towards the more naturalistic. The terrace must have been thrown down and landscaped with some considerable effort, but by Taylor's estate plan of 1772 it is already shown erased. What might have been left for Lancelot Brown's own proposed works "around the house and terras" five years later can only be guessed.

The painting from the 1760s also illustrates the intended effect that another feature had in the landscape. The ornamental silhouette of Penpole Lodge, designed in the 1720s but demolished in 1952, can be seen clearly crowning the distant ridge. It appears that there was careful consideration of the placement of this structure and the effect it would achieve when viewed from the house and loggia. The vast balustrade on the roof are echoed by those originally on the loggia, but now lost. A dramatic silhouette cast against the sky was also given by Vanbrugh's 'Echo' or 'Grand Alcove' opposite the front of the house. Understanding the original effect of all three of these buildings has been greatly diminished by the growth of trees and bushes around them.

It is important to note the significance of the year 1720 in the development of the estate. The majority of the key garden designs incorporated into the Kings Weston Book of Drawings, including the Echo and Penpole Lodge are all proposed after 1720. Halett's estate plan of 1720 must therefore predate these additions and must illustrate the park before Southwell and Vanbrugh began work modernising it to match the ambition of the newly finished house. Another drawing in the Kings Weston Book of drawings dated August 1720 hints at the remarkable scale and ambition of these later works.

A long fold-out drawing showing a measured survey of the gradient section leading out from the garden front of Kings Weston House (Fig. 7) picks up the division of the frame of the land shown leading uphill on Halett's plan. At the end of the drawing furthest from the house there is some interesting detail where the natural slope departs away from a flat plateau section beyond the end of the gardens. Heights are measured showing the difference between the natural topography and the level plateau.

The implication is that this is a proposal for either flattening part of Kings Weston Hill or its remodelling to a steeper profile. The latter is an unlikely idea for improving a garden, but the scale of the proposal, the removal of 20-30 feet of rock, seems an incredible proposition.

However surprising it might be, when the early survey is overlaid with a modern section to the same scale the evidence that this was undertaken is compelling. A whole section of the hillside appears to have been quarried out and the slope overlooking Shirehampton Park naturalised.

Further evidence to support the undertaking of the project comes in December 1732 when the French Journal Mercure de France noted at Kings Weston "that workers levelling a nearby mountain (Montagne) have found there several embalmed human bodies, with inscriptions on copper which appear to suggest that these bodies had been interred there for nearly 2000 years". The extensive archaeological record of tumuli and other ancient burials distributed along the length of the Kings Weston ridge imply the reported discovery is associated with this area of the park. A raised outcrop behind the Echo in the location shown in 1720 would be a logical extension to the known pattern of burials so it can be suggested that the 1732 excavations represent a delayed start to the earlier proposal to level the hill.

But why was such an extreme measure taken to improve the grounds? Halett's plan shows the southern area of the estate between Shirehampton Road and the River Avon, now Shirehampton Park, as fields and hedgerows, but the Kings Weston Book of Drawings contains several landscape projects in the area after this date. A 1724 project for a view mound on Conger Hill and a seat or summerhouse for Longcombe suggest it was being incorporated into the ornamental grounds at this time. The rolling hills and dramatic scenery looking towards Somerset and the Avon Gorge, and the attraction of ships on the Avon would have been appealing additions to any estate, but the biggest impediment to successfully unifying the Home Park and Kings Weston House with the river appears to have been the steep outcrop of Kings Weston Hill.
the western end to terminate as a 2.2m high wall (Fig. 9). The date of either of these phases is uncertain, but the later work incorporated black cast slag blocks typical of other mid-late 18th century work on the estate. The whole is certainly shown as early as 1772 and is well marked on Taylor’s survey of the estate where it is identified as ‘terras’ (Fig. 10).

There are several other designed viewing points on the Kings Weston Estate as well as the more famous prospects enjoyed by the public throughout the 18th and early 19th century from Penpole Point and Kings Weston Hill. Sadly the majority of these have succumbed to nature. The Kings Weston Action Group, a volunteer organisation, was formed in 2011 to try and reverse some of the worst of the neglect the estate has suffered since the last owner-occupier left in the 1930s.

The group is presently putting together a restoration plan for the viewing terrace overlooking Shirleympton Park which is in a poor state of repair. It is hoped that with public and Council support the once-famous views from Penpole Point will also be tackled during 2014. With a new team in the City’s Estates Department, a new Conservation Management Plan, and a new owner at Kings Weston House there is a new sense of optimism on the Kings Weston estate.

Fig. 9 The south west end of the viewing terrace wall today. The scar of the shallow ramped end of the first phase of the terrace begins at the pile of rubble in the foreground. Black slag blocks can also be seen here used as coping stones.

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David Martyn lives in Bristol and works full time as an Architect. Responsible for the contemporary design of the recent J3 library scheme for the City in Easton he also has interests in historic buildings and conservation and is a member of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain. A keen amateur hobby in photography led to the recent publication of Bristol City on Show with Andrew Foyle and his photographs appear regularly in other publications.

For more information about Kings Weston and the Action Group visit www.kwag.org.uk

David started the Kings Weston Action Group (KWAG) with his friend Tim Denning in 2011 with a focus on bringing wider attention to the Kings Weston Estate and its declining condition. Working as an unpaid volunteer he has built the group up on a firm foundation of original research and physical work, with many of his weekends spent clearing the park's historic structures from the grip of brambles and undergrowth.