

Robert Marnock worked in South Buckinghamshire throughout the 1860s. The gardens he is known to have been involved with are: Hitcham House (formerly Blythewood), Berry Hill and Taplow Court, which form a cluster to the east of the River Thames. All three sites changed hands around 1852 due to the sale of the Taplow estate by the Earl of Orkney. The new owners had made their money in business and therefore had sufficient funds to have their gardens created by one of the top designers of the day, Robert Marnock. They are located to the south of the better-known neighbouring estates of Cliveden and Dropmore. This area of Buckinghamshire was much sought after during the C18 and C19 due to its proximity to Windsor Castle. There were also good connections by river and later the Great Western Railway to London; it remains popular today with the M4 to the south. Despite considerable growth during the C20, the area has a rural feel, with Burnham Beeches to the north and the vast areas of parkland surrounding Dropmore. There is however a constant threat of development from Slough and Maidenhead which continue to expand.

Of the three Marnock gardens the one at Hitcham House is probably the best surviving. Berry Hill has suffered considerable neglect and it is difficult to determine what Marnock worked on at Taplow Court.

Hitcham House

Today's house and garden date from 1866, when it was known as Blythewood. However, a much older Manor House and its associated gardens, walls and fishponds was situated to the north of the current house on the far side of Hitcham Lane, and shortly before WWI the new house adopted the name of Hitcham. The earlier gardens include extensive Grade II listed walls, gate piers and gates which are in a dilapidated state (2023). This research has been made possible by the survival of fifteen pages of Marnock's accounts sent to the owner George Hanbury, which include detailed descriptions about how he worked and who he was consulting (see image).

The land at Hitcham had previously belonged to Lord Grenville of Dropmore and following his death it was purchased by George Hanbury, a London brewer and hop merchant. The Hanbury family had made their money in brewing: Sampson Hanbury (George's uncle?) had purchased a share in the Truman Brewery in 1788 and was involved with Truman, Hanbury & Buxton for the next 40 years. It became the largest brewery in the world and was eventually floated on the stock exchange in 1888. <https://foxlinks.com/x-truman-hanbury-buxton-brewery/>

He employed the architect Robert Smith to build a new house in the Victorian Gothic style and Robert Marnock to create the gardens. The building contractors were Messrs Holland & Hannen, the site manager was Mr Silver and the garden planting was carried out by a Mr Turner. Marnock's fee was three guineas per day in October 1866; by the end of November his bill had risen to £13-7s-9d for four and a quarter days' work. From the notes in the accounts, it is evident that his work involved spending considerable amounts of time corresponding with contractors' suppliers, the gardener and the architect.

Robert Marnock's invoices for the work are held by the Hanbury family and provide an excellent detailed record of his time at Hitcham. It is quite apparent that he was involved in much more than just the garden design. From as early as December 1865 he is advising Smith and Hanbury on the actual positioning of the house; this was important given that the land is in a secluded hollow and the garden front was positioned to take advantage of this privacy and the morning sun. He makes

numerous site visits to supervise the groundwork, including the levels for the multiple terraces on the garden front, positioning of paths, ponds, a lake and a ha-ha.

The levels were rather a challenge as the garden drops away steeply. This involves much adjusting and redrawing of the plans and work did not really get underway until 1867. At the end of 1866 Marnock is working on his plans for the hothouses and kitchen garden design, with its associated service buildings. To improve his property, Hanbury had a road on the east boundary diverted in 1867.

The pleasure grounds

By the end of 1866, Hanbury agreed to the scheme for the grounds, walls and fencing. Turner's estimates for the garden had been approved and work begun. The plans for the adaption of levels of the grounds, especially relating to the footpath, were in progress and the highway surveyor had determined the line of the boundary fence. In January 1867 the ground plan for the house was staked out, and on 28 January Hanbury, Smith and Marnock met at Hitcham to discuss the house. A few days later, Hanbury's wife Mary was satisfied even though she had not visited, and work began.

At Hitcham, Marnock was planting in the 'gardenesque' style as defined by J.C. Loudon: all the trees and shrubs were arranged with regard to their kinds and dimensions, initially close together and thinned out at a later date, to best display the natural form and habit of each. The ideal for this type of garden was once the trees had reached 9 to 12 metres and the shrubberies were full and in vigorous health, the planting throwing scattered shade over the smooth lawn. In the relatively small garden at Hitcham, Marnock achieved his aim of a broad sweep of high-quality lawn and the position of trees in relation to it. This style of garden required maintenance of a high standard which would have been possible at the time it was created, but following WWI and into the C20 this was no longer achievable and to a large extent the design has become overgrown.

Planting had commenced in February 1867 and the trees were planted in May, when quantities of manure were ordered to lay round the trees. Aerial photographs from WWII show the trees in the pleasure grounds to be an appropriate size; however by the end of the C20 when the house was in multiple ownership, they needed attention and were blocking light to the lawns. The only reference to a nurseryman is a price enquiry to Fisher Holmes, rose breeders of Handsworth. It is possible that Turner the gardener ordered plants from suppliers.

Marnock created an unusually shaped small lake in the pleasure grounds with two islands in the round section; a narrower tail extends to the north and a small tail to the south is crossed by a footbridge. A deep ha-ha with brick-built support separates the pleasure grounds from the park, while beyond this was an orchard; this no longer survives (2023) and the field is used for grazing. The ground was levelled, and a croquet ground was laid out to the south of the trees on the east front, probably where the tennis court stands today. The terraces on the garden front were the main feature of the pleasure grounds, extending the width of the house about 100 feet (30m). Today the top one is gravelled and the subsequent levels, accessed by steps, are laid to lawn. The second terrace is more formal and now includes a box parterre, yew topiary and hedging. Beyond the hedge a bank slopes down to the wooded area of the garden.

The 'New Cut' and boundary planting

During February 1867, Marnock was in communication with the local Magistrate regarding the straightening of the footpath, and permission was granted for the footpath to be lowered and straightened. The work also included the removal of a bank by the road and the felling of some trees.

In March, he meets with Mr Turner the gardener to discuss the formation of a bank to conceal the footpath, and presumably the village of Burnham beyond, from the house. He contemplates whether planting would be sufficient and negate the need to carry out groundwork; from surviving evidence it appears he settled on a combination of both (see image of New Cut). The OS 6in 1900 shows the New Cut runs west to east and extends from the most southerly point of the pleasure grounds through the park; on the boundary it joins an existing footpath to the village of Burnham.

Kitchen garden and service buildings

The 1955 1:2500 OS map shows that Marnock designed a large walled kitchen garden directly north of the house. It was divided in two by this date but may have had a well in the centre previously (OS 1st edn 25in). The east-facing interior wall had a range of hothouses, including a vinery. Further glasshouses and forcing houses were located outside the walls and a back range of buildings on the east boundary wall housed sheds, including a mushroom house and a gardener's cottage. Marnock's accounts state that he was planning the kitchen garden area during March 1867, paying particular attention to the brickwork for the glasshouses and sheds and to the construction of the walls of the kitchen garden, which survives intact (2023). Marnock drew plans for the gardener's cottage and the gateways into the kitchen garden area, and also planted the area around the stables, church lodge and along the boundary with the road.

The glasshouses were set against the formidable north wall which still displays original whitewashing along its length and there are remnants of fixings and tiles. The C19 glasshouses were supplied by Foster & Pearson [Our Heritage – Foster & Pearson Glasshouses \(fosterandpearson.co.uk\)](http://fosterandpearson.co.uk) p.82. In 2023, most of the northern kitchen garden is laid to lawn and flowerbeds with perimeter planting. The southern half has two simple sheds and again is mostly lawn with perimeter planting.

The site also includes Church Lodge, South Lodge, Stables (2023 seven separate properties) and Dairy Cottage.

References and Acknowledgements

Thank you to Perry Ashwood for showing us round the gardens at Hitcham House

Roger Worthington and Robert Hanbury of the Hitcham & Taplow Society

Hitcham and Taplow Society Newsletter Spring 2022 p.4

Current images: Claire de Carle



Backhouses and walled kitchen garden (including decorative corner cap)



Pleasure grounds NE of house, dairy cottage



Pleasure grounds south of house showing sloping gradient



New Cut with banked boundary planting



Pleasure grounds to SW of house



The Hanbury family at Blythewood, Mary and George seated centre.

(From: *Around Burnham, From Old Photographs*. D. Blackman, D. Chevous)

George Stanbury Esq

Perhaps you
will kindly
excuse all this
writing, it is easier
to have the copies
from my desk, than
from to send them to
you.

To Robert Marnock, Esq

1866.

Do attending to fixing site of Blythwood
House and superintending the garden
works as under. viz

- Oct 9th Called on you by request, and arranged to
accompany you to Taplow. 13th Went to Taplow
to meet you and to discuss about site of house
- 24th Letters to you on sundry matters, about Architect
se &c. - 27th Went to Taplow to further examine
and determine site of house. Completed plan
of my notions in respect to this and sent
same to you - 31st Met Mr Smith by appointment
to explain to him my views about site of house
- Nov 1st Letters to you and also to Mr Turner about
planting - Sent to you plan of ground likely
to be required during Building Operations
- 7th Letter to Mr Arber about the extent of ground
required - 10th Planning about Kitchew Garden
- 24th Letter in answer, about plants

4 1/4 days

13 7 9

- Dec 1st Letters to you and two others 5th Called at ground
to meet man in charge of the work from
Turner and ordered the work to be commenced
- 6th Planning further for garden scheme. Walls,
Hot houses &c &c 7th Completed certain plans
and called on you by appointment. Saw
you, and received orders to see to the planting
&c. 8th Letter to Turner about the above

Robert Marnock accounts 1866 (with kind permission of Robert Hanbury)



1877 1st edn OS (with permission of Buckinghamshire Council HER)



1999 AP (with permission of Buckinghamshire Council HER)