

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.

The only source that has been found to date which refers to Marnock working at Taplow Court is in the *Gardener's Chronicle* obituary of 23 November 1889: Taplow Court is mentioned as one of his major works alongside Blythewood (Hitcham). There are very few archives held at Taplow Court itself, the Grenfell archive being held at the Buckinghamshire Archives. This includes a plan of Taplow Court Estate, the property of W.H. Grenfell, 1877 which was probably drawn by Marnock. Sales particulars and a tracing of the sales plan dating from 1852 confirm existing features prior to Marnock's arrival, photographs from the album of Constance Aylmer, garden notes from 1898 onwards. Invoices and letters relating to work carried out at Taplow from 1852 onwards include two letters from the landscape architect William Andrews Nesfield (1793–1881) whose speciality was creating parterre gardens based on C16 and C17 century designs.

Nesfield's letter of 23 February 1856 is regarding a survey at Taplow. He is happy to undertake it, however due to 'quantities of other engagements' he himself is not able to oversee and he is unavailable until the first week in May so there will be a delay in him 'studying a design'. He therefore says he will send his surveyor, Mr Howe, during the week of the 10 March and then he hopes to consult with Grenfell sometime over Easter. The second communication confirms the surveyor's visit; it could be that due to his workload he was unable to carry out the work or it is possible that he carried out some initial work.

Charles Pascoe Grenfell died in 1867. His eldest son, Charles William, had predeceased him in 1851 and his grandson, William Henry Grenfell, 1st Baron Desborough (1855–1945) was only 12 when he inherited the estate. This accounts for the delay in engaging Marnock. It was not until 1877 that he was asked to make improvements and drew up the plan for the gardens. By this time William Henry had come of age and taken over the running of the estate. During the intervening years Marnock had been working at Blythewood and Berry Hill therefore spending time close by, and it is likely that he was known to the Grenfell family. The commission at Taplow was one of the last before he retired, Alexander Park, Hastings in 1878 being his last major municipal project. He did however continue with his private work up until his death in 1889.

## Taplow Court (Grade II house and gardens)

Taplow Court is located on the eastern edge of Maidenhead, 5km west of Slough and forms the western boundary of Taplow village. The 25ha site is bounded to the west by the River Thames and to the north by Cliveden. It is situated on a plateau high above the Thames: the western edge runs along the steep scarp and cliffs above the river and down to the water itself. Several paths traverse the densely wooded hillside, leading down to the riverside paths. George Hamilton, first Lord Orkney, bought both Taplow Court and the Cliveden estate around 1700 and it seems he mainly lived at Taplow rather than Cliveden although the two estates were developed in tandem, particularly the hillside woodland walks which are contiguous. Today those at Cliveden are more accessible, although at both sites keeping the views down to the Thames clear is difficult due to the steep terrain. The Orkneys remodelled the house several times, and it was remodelled again by William Burn following the purchase by Charles Pascoe Grenfell in 1852. During and following WWII the house was used for institutional purposes. It was sold to Plessy electronics in 1963 and bought by the current owners SGI-UK in 1988.

### Pleasure grounds

By the time the house was purchased by Grenfell in 1852 the gardens that survive today were largely already in place. The estate plan which accompanied the sales particulars in 1852 shows the area around the house already divided into several distinct sections and the large kitchen garden to the east of the main approach is in situ. The wooded ride, which was once grassed, was predominantly of yew (by 2023 there was a considerable amount of secondary growth) and cedar walk which were planted in the eighteenth century, also shown on the plan. There were straight garden paths linking the areas of garden so it is likely that terraces had also been created on the north and west fronts of the house, Nesfield carrying out further work after Grenfell purchased the house. The sales particulars site description mentions 'A fine bold lawn clothed with the choicest shrubs and trees with an avenue of Cedar of Lebanon extending from the mansion towards Cliveden and the beautiful drive leading to the river Thames'. It also says that 'The mansion grounds command fine extensive and varied views'; some of these have now been lost as the trees have matured during the last 170 years. There are views from the pleasure grounds to the west side of the house and it may be possible to see Windsor Castle.



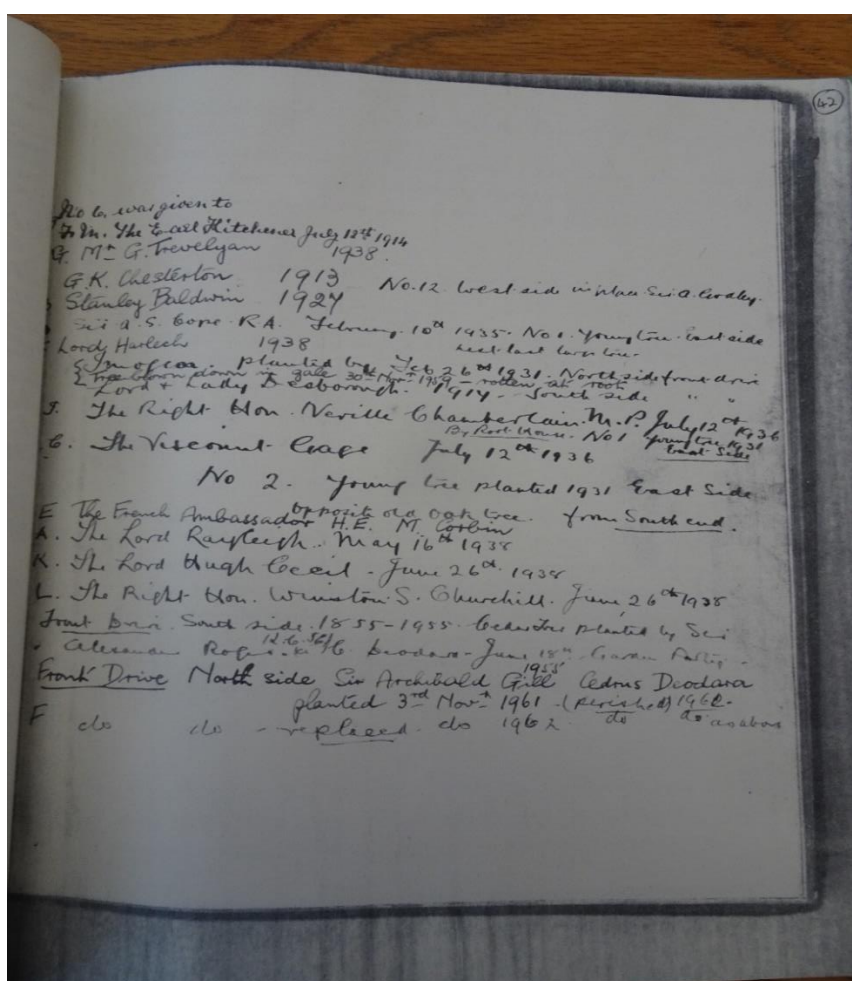
Southern end of Cedar Walk



Northern end of Cedar Walk

## Cedar Walk

The Cedar Walk is located along the west edge of the plateau, bounded to the east by parkland and to the west by the steep wooded escarpment, it takes the form of a grass ride flanked by an avenue of mixed varieties of cedars. At the southern end Cedar of Lebanon dominate; these probably date from the eighteenth century and were planted for Lord Orkney. In 1904 the walk was extended north where younger cedars of different species were planted, by members of the Grenfell family and guests to the house, including members of parliament and royalty. A list can be found in the garden records held by Bucks Archives and names include Stanley Baldwin, Joseph Chamberlain, Bonar Law, King Edward VII, the Crown Prince and Princess of Sweden and a Japanese Prince. During the severe storms of 1990 a considerable number of trees were lost, but sufficient survive such that the initial design element is still evident.



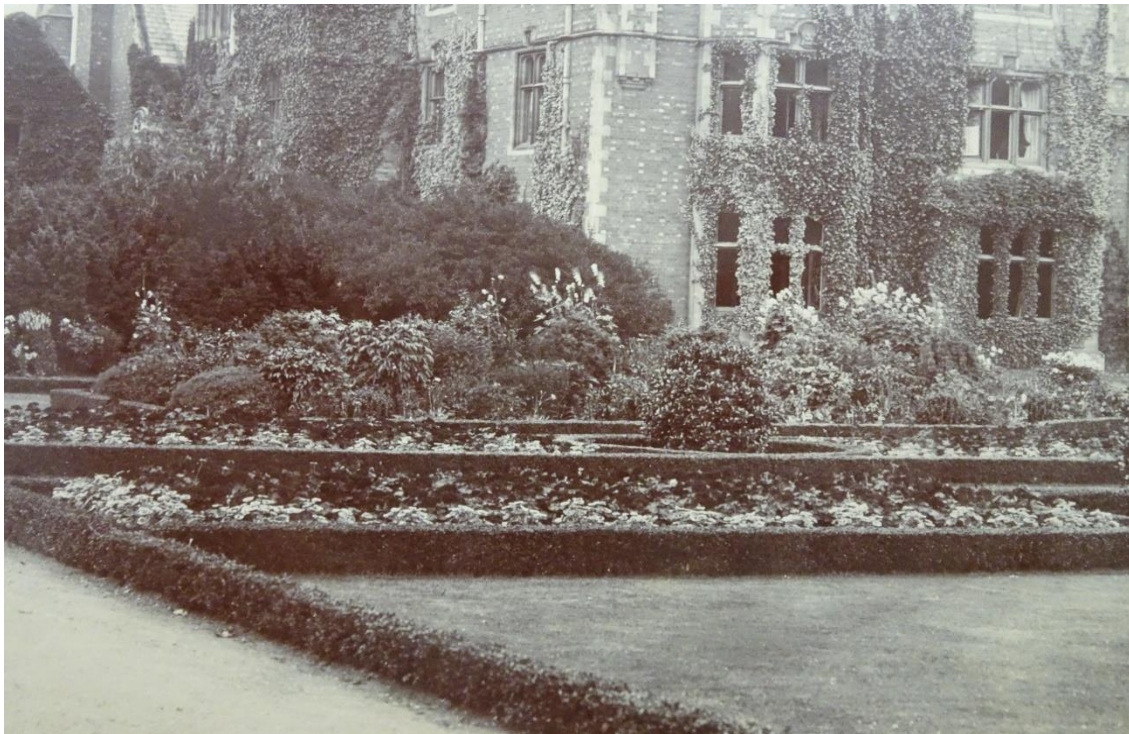
Garden diary for Taplow Court (Bucks Archives)

## Robert Marnock's contribution to the gardens

The key source for determining work that Marnock may have carried out is the 1877 plan, which was probably drawn by him or one of his staff and is based on the much rougher sale plan of 1852. By comparing his work at Hitcham and Taplow we can identify similarities in their styles. In the pleasure grounds at Taplow his alterations probably included the creation of grand borders, alterations to the parterre and new tree planting. The existing terraces were planted with flower borders edged with box hedging and taller shrubs to the rear and bedding plants in the foreground.



Images held by Bucks Archives show the immaculate pleasure grounds in the later part of the nineteenth century, and it was probably these that were remembered in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* obituary. At all three of the Marnock sites he planted large numbers of trees – given his interest in trees and shrubs they would have been incorporated into his improvements at Taplow, and it is probable that he used some of the varieties that he had previously used at Berry Hill (see plant list in Berry Hill Report) and that some were intended as statement trees. The main features the Cedar Walk and the riverside walk were already in place but may have been added to and the edges softened along the boundary of the park. As the cedars dated from the C18 some may have needed replacing by the 1870s. The Britain from Above aerial photographs from 1953 shows younger trees in the pleasure grounds and the 1899 25in OS map shows trees in the park and gardens which are not present on the 1877 plan.



Detail of the borders to north of house (Bucks Archives)

### **The kitchen gardens**

At Hitcham House Marnock was responsible for designing and overseeing the new kitchen garden, however at Taplow at least two kitchen gardens were already established. The larger, situated directly north of the carriage drive, is surrounded by a C17 red-brick wall with three main gateways to the north, west and south with brick piers and wrought iron gates; this was converted into a car park in the 1970s. The second, to the south of the drive, contained glasshouse ranges, pits, vineries and peach houses (1852 Sales particulars) which were removed in the 1980s and a brick-built office building constructed in their place. The third walled kitchen garden, located south of the churchyard drive, was converted to an ornamental garden around 1996. Marnock may have been responsible for the glasshouses and buildings, including a gardener's house, bothy and fruit room at the second one and the walls at the third, as they do not appear on the 1852 plan. Kitchen gardens seemed to be a speciality of Marnock's as he designed the one at Hitcham and made considerable improvements to Kemp's at Berry Hill.

See *Gardeners' Chronicle* 6 June 1908 pp.372–3 for a detailed description of the gardens.

## References

Historic England List entry 1000607 for Taplow Court

Grenfell Estate Papers, Buckinghamshire Archives

*Gardeners' Chronicle* 23 November 1889

Thank you to Jan Woudstra for archival references.

## Current images Claire de Carle



North front pleasure grounds (Bucks Archives)





North parterre (Bucks Archives)



Marnock Plan 1877 (core of site), Buckinghamshire Archives





View to the west from pleasure grounds (NB the urns have moved around)



The Parterre 2023



Recent tree planting

**Claire de Carle July 2023**