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# MELBOURNE HALL RECONSIDERED

Philip Heath

In June 1789 the celebrated diarist Viscount Torrington visited Melbourne Hall in Derbyshire. He considered it 'a decent mansion with such an old fashioned garden of yew hedges, fountains, and alleys, as now becomes a curiosity, and to be admired for that shade so much wanted in modern shrubberies. There is also an interspersion of walled garden where we ate for the first time of cherries'.<sup>1</sup> Melbourne was at this time the secondary residence of Peniston Lamb, 1st Lord Melbourne, whose father had acquired it by marriage to the heiress of the Cokes of Melbourne. The garden, laid out in its present form by Queen Anne's Vice Chamberlain Thomas Coke in 1704, has since become famous as the best surviving early 18th century English garden in the manner of Le Nôtre. It has never been considered ordinary; as early as 1712, the Derbyshire historian William Wolley wrote of the 'curious gardens' newly completed by Thomas Coke at Melbourne. The garden is still owned by the family that created it, although the estate has sometimes descended through the female line causing a change of surname. The present owner is Lord Ralph Kerr, son of the 12th Marquess of Lothian.

In April 1928 an article on Melbourne Hall was published in two consecutive issues of *Country Life*. It was written by Philip Kerr who had done a considerable amount of research into the family archive, which still remains at Melbourne. Later articles on Melbourne, notably in Green's *Gardener to Queen Anne* (1956) and in Hussey's *English Gardens and Landscapes 1700–1750* (1967) are heavily indebted to Philip Kerr's work, which is excellent as far as it goes but is now sixty years old and left a great deal unsaid. Architectural accounts of the house itself are inaccurate and garbled, and nothing has so far been written about the landscaped park that the Cokes attempted to create around the house in the 18th century. I am able to produce this short article on the basis of intermittent research into the Melbourne archive since 1978.

Melbourne Hall was first built in the 12th or 13th centuries to provide a rectory house for successive Bishops of Carlisle, who used Melbourne parish church as a substitute cathedral when the Scottish borderlands were turbulent and unsafe. By the 16th century, when Carlisle was more peaceful, the Bishops no longer needed their secondary residence at Melbourne and they began to lease the rectory house and lands to laymen. In 1629, the Bishop leased the property 'for three lives' to Sir John ('Secretary') Coke (1563–1644), who was Principal Secretary of State to Charles I for eleven years preceding the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> Sir John had a house in London at Garlick Hill, but he was a native of Derbyshire and chose Melbourne as a retirement home.

The house he found there looked typically Elizabethan, having been restored in the 1590s by or for Sir Francis Needham, the previous lessee. It had a hall in the north range, service rooms in the west wing and parlours in the east wing. The principal front faced south onto a forecourt, and there was an inner court between the wings. By the east front there was a small formal garden laid out around two grass plots (see Fig. 1).

This garden was bounded on its northern and eastern sides by a strong retaining wall with a hexagonal dovecot on the angle, converted into the present Muniment Room (Fig. 2) in 1708. Beyond the wall there was an irregular plot of land used as an orchard and kitchen garden. By the north side of the house there was a square walled garden and to the north west lay the outbuildings and their associated yards. These still survive, including a mediaeval aisled barn and an attractive range of 16th or 17th century brick stables now converted into houses.

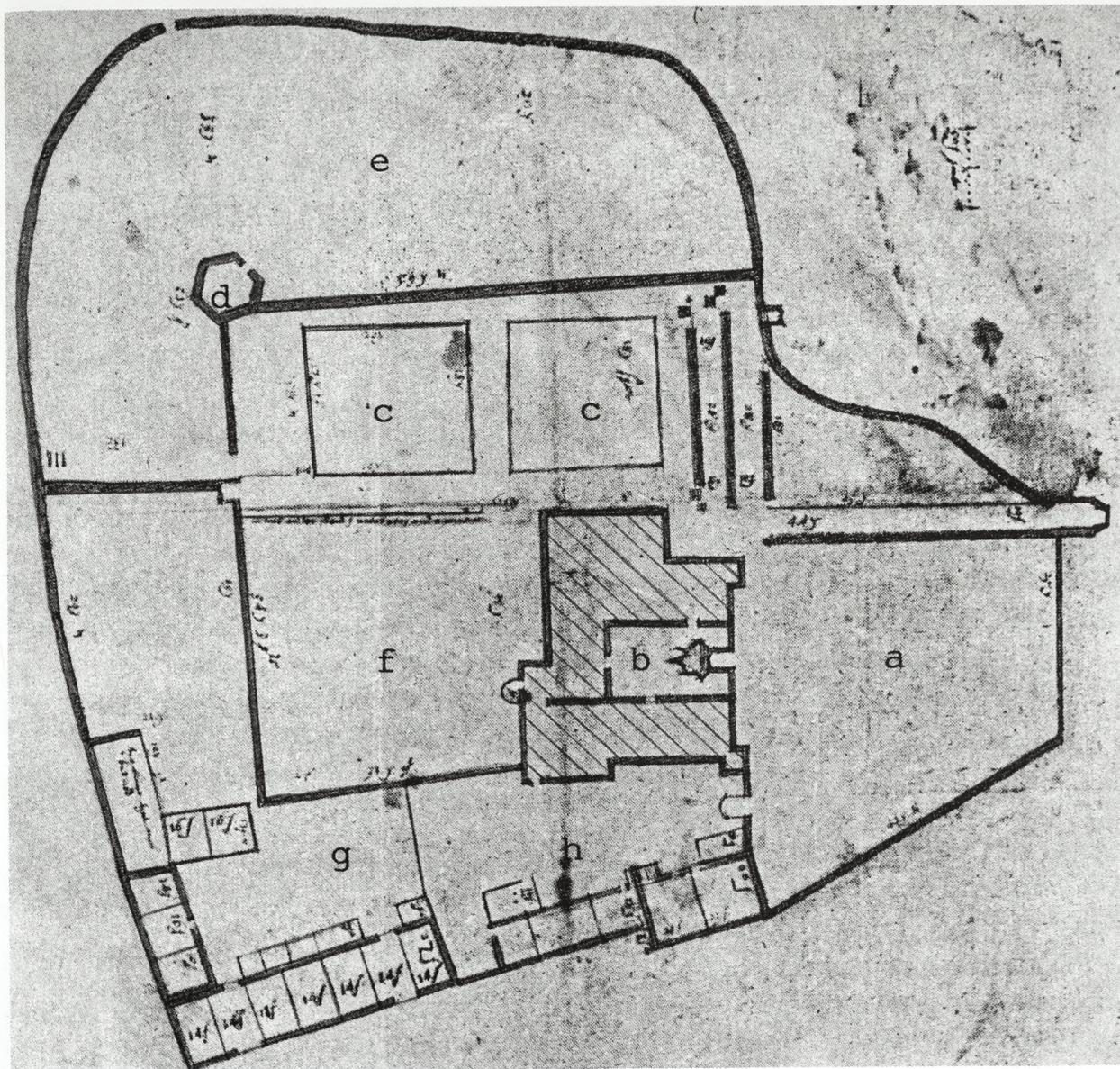


Fig. 1. Melbourne Hall and grounds in 1630 a: south forecourt; b: inner court; c: grass plots; d: dovecote; e: kitchen garden and orchard; f: square walled garden; g: barnyard; h: stable yard.



Fig. 2. The Muniment Room.

This compact arrangement was firmly rooted in a worldly and industrious village context. A few yards to the west Sir John could see the fine Norman church. To the south, across the forecourt, he could see the large mill pool, fringed on the near side by cottages and on the far side by ploughland and a strip of commonland. The surface rose and fell as water was drawn off for the mills, and all day long a steady stream of traffic would tread the road between the pool and the Hall, which was then the main highway between Derby and Ashby de la Zouch. Immediately opposite the windows of the house there was a horsewash, and a little further west there was a natural spring draining into the pool, where the local housewives met to pound their washing.<sup>3</sup> To add to this lack of privacy, the Hall was surrounded on all sides by public roads, that on the east separating Sir John's house from another large house known as Blackwall Hall.

Within a few months of obtaining the lease, Sir John had planned substantial alterations to the house. In November 1629 he wrote lengthy instructions minutely detailing his requirements, complete with measurements and partial floor plans.<sup>4</sup> He divided his directions under separate headings for the masons, carpenters, joiners, smiths, plumbers, glaziers, stonegetters and labourers, plasterers and pargeters. The alterations involved rebuilding the north range, extending the east wing, building a new principal staircase and various other works, all done in an extremely conservative style fitting for a man known as 'the last Elizabethan'. Sir John ended his directions by ordering the house and grounds to be measured and plotted, and the resultant plan (Fig. 1) survives as an extremely useful document. Despite these preparations, the restricted site offered little scope for major alteration and very little was done at this stage.

At the outbreak of Civil War Sir John quitted Melbourne, leaving his son Sir John Coke the Younger (1607–1650) in control of the estate. The younger Sir John also left Melbourne when Charles I was executed in 1649, but in the intervening period the garden was greatly extended. In December 1647, an agreement was reached with the 76 principal householders of Melbourne to enclose the public lane on the east side of the garden for Sir John's private use. This done, the lane and the site of Blackwall Hall beyond it were enclosed into the garden and a new perimeter wall was built.<sup>5</sup> The garden as shown in Fig. 3 was probably laid out by Sir John Coke the Younger in 1648; the flower garden was enlarged, the kitchen garden was repositioned and regularised. By the stream at the bottom of the garden two moated islands were created to serve as ornamental stews. The whole was typical of contemporary gardening practice, recommended in books such as Gervase Markham's *Cheape and Good Husbandry* of 1638. Due to early deaths and long minorities, the family were in residence only intermittently during the second half of the 17th century, and little was done either to the house or to the garden.

The present appearance of Melbourne Hall and its environment owes more to the Rt Hon Thomas Coke (1675–1727) than any other of the Melbourne Cokes. Thomas was the great grandson of Secretary Coke, and inherited Melbourne upon his coming of age in 1696. He had travelled extensively and was familiar with the latest technological and stylistic advances in architecture and gardening. His notebooks include copious extracts and observations about such matters as 'Kensington Green Houses of the Dorick Order', the 'New River Windmill Engine at Islington' and the proper care of plants. Thomas Coke has a place of his own in Howard Colvin's *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects* and is believed to have designed a house at Cranford for the third Earl of Berkeley.

Documentary evidence shows that Coke's intention to create a new garden at Melbourne in the fashionable French manner was made clear from the start, and between 1696 and 1699 large quantities of trees and shrubs were ordered from London and Wise's nurseries at Brompton Park. However, no plans for the enlargement and remodelling of the garden were yet implemented: the house and part of the garden were still held only by lease,

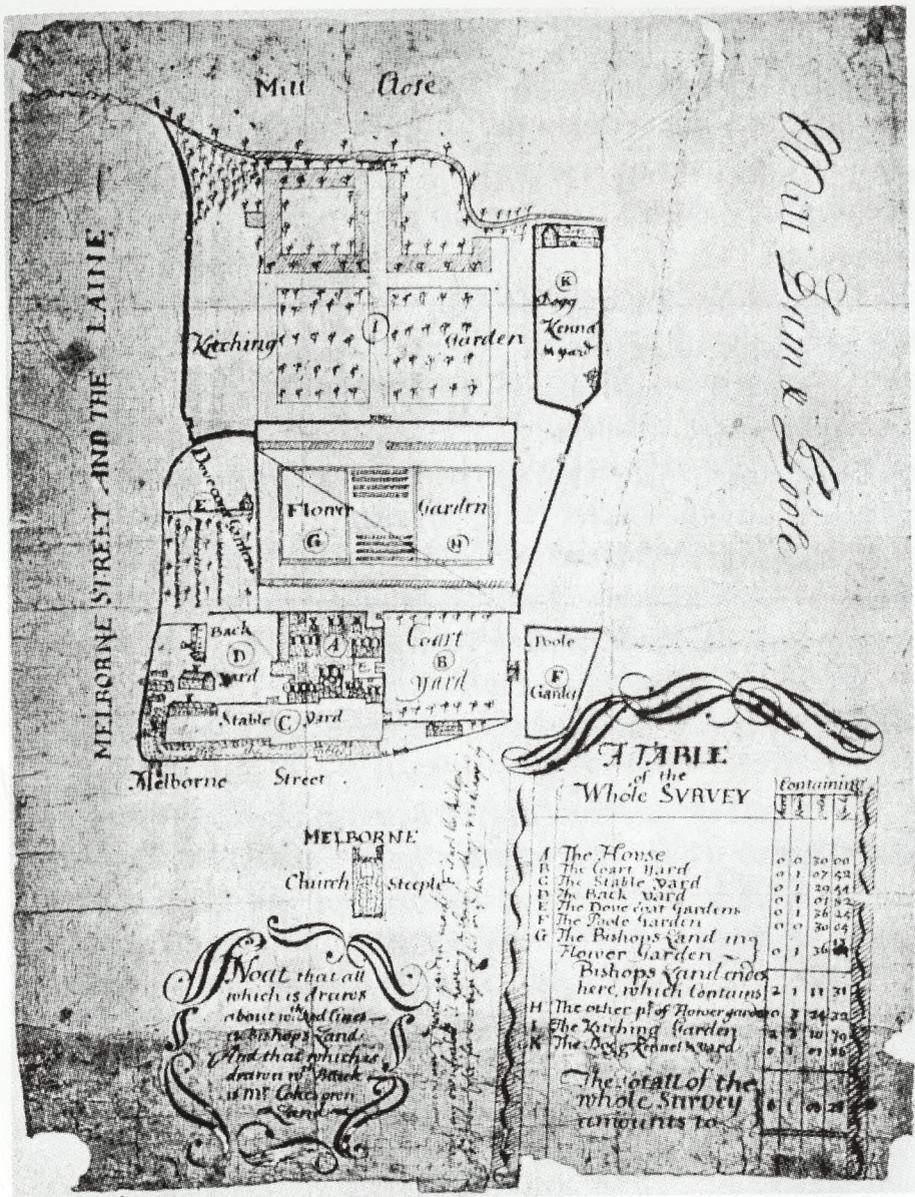


Fig. 4. Melbourne Hall Gardens, by Thomas Kirkland 1722. The site of the house is in the top right hand corner.

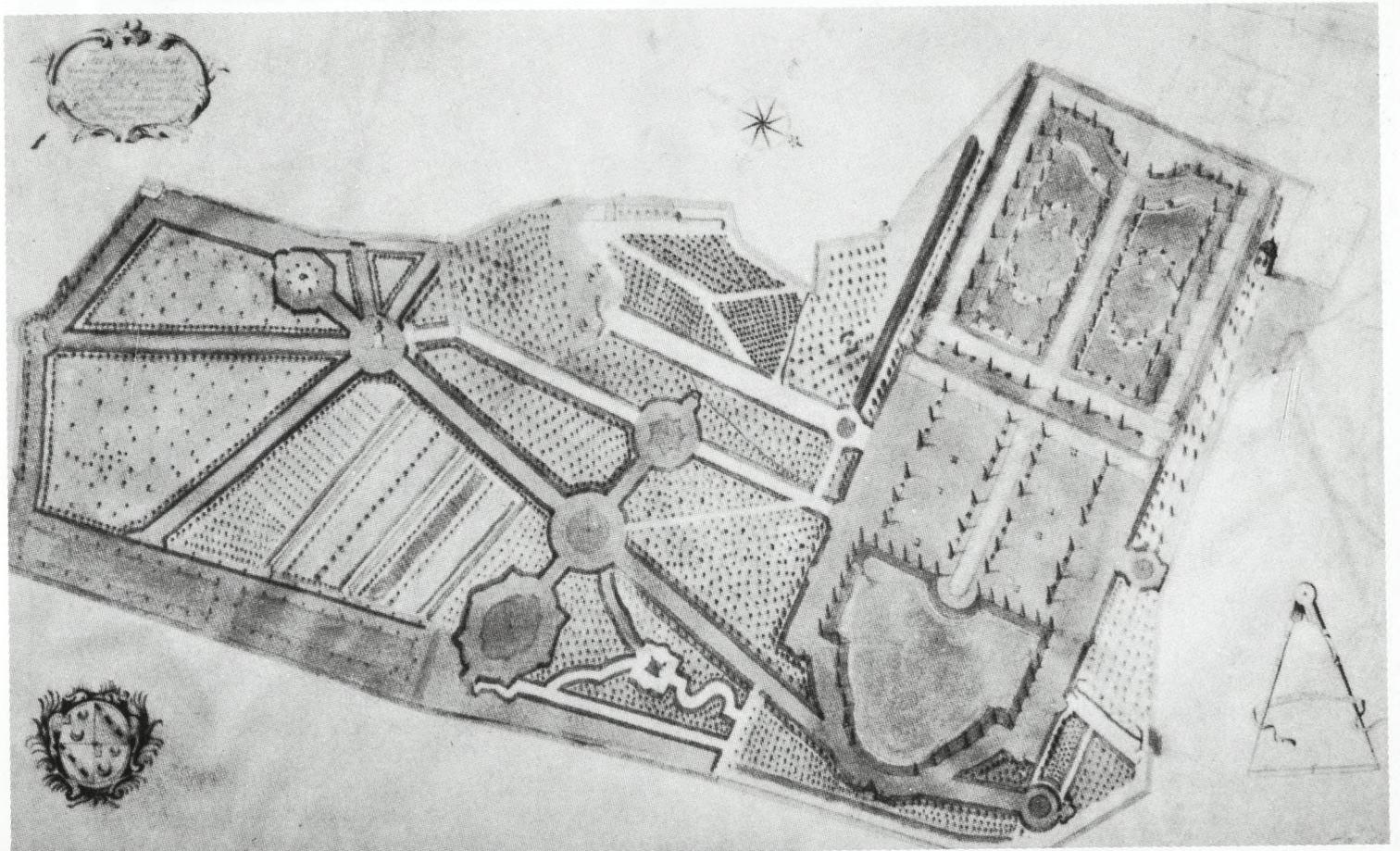


Fig. 3. Melbourne Hall and Grounds in 1698.

and Coke thought it unwise to proceed further without securing the freehold. In 1698 he opened negotiations with the Bishop of Carlisle and a plan of the grounds was made (Fig. 3) to distinguish the Bishop's land from Thomas Coke's freehold.<sup>6</sup> After lengthy deliberation and a period of deadlock, a compromise was reached in 1704 when Coke obtained the freehold by Act of Parliament subject to several covenants.

Work on the new garden (Fig. 4) began immediately: on 6th May 1704, a contract was signed between Thomas Coke and William Cooke of Walcot to reconstruct the old flower and kitchen gardens as 'a division of Partare work' with 'terrasses, sloop, verges and fleets of steps' for a total of £400.<sup>7</sup> By July, Cooke reported that he was ready for the statues, and in October a second contract was agreed with him for laying out the rest of the garden. Most of this part was entirely new and occupied a field known as Mill Close, lying to the south-east of the old garden. Cooke's second contract, for £450, comprised levelling and forming the ground for 'divisions of wilderness work', 'reservoirs or bassons for water', fruit walls, kitchen gardens, orchards, plantations and hedged alleys.<sup>8</sup> The moated islands of the 17th century garden were filled in to be replaced by the present 'great basin' further east. Thomas Coke had long intended to add Mill Close to his garden, and had discussed the matter on site with George London in October 1701.

The Melbourne garden is often attributed to London and Wise, the Royal Gardeners, but their chief involvement was as consultants when preliminary plans had already been prepared. They doubtless suggested refinements, but the true authors of the garden were William Cooke and Thomas Coke himself. Perhaps William Cooke has some connection with London's former partner of the same surname, and he is surely the same 'Mr Coke ye Gardainer' who provided plans for a new garden at Calke Abbey in 1709. Thomas Coke spent

Fig. 5. The Indian Slave and the Black Moor.



much of his time in London, where he had a house in St James's Place, but in 1705 his sister Elizabeth went to live at Melbourne to take charge of the two daughters of his first marriage. While she remained there, she corresponded tirelessly with him in long vivacious letters, keeping him up to date with progress in the garden and about the latest local gossip. In 1705, she wrote that 'All the dust and noisy works of your garden is finished', and the next few years were spent bringing the garden alive with plants, urns, statuary and water features.

The lead statuary was supplied from John Van Nost's workshop in Piccadilly. His account for it is dated 28th April 1706,<sup>9</sup> although some of the items listed appear to have been supplied a few years earlier. It includes '4 pr. of Boyes cast in Mettall £42-00-00, Perseus & Andromeda Do. £45-00-00, an Indian Slave & Black Moor Do. £30-00-00' and 'a Vause as per Agreement £100-00-00'. All of these items can still be found in the garden today: The Indian Slave and the Black Moor (Fig. 5) stand in the centres of the parterres next to the house; Perseus and Andromeda stand in the yew hedges on the east side of the 'great basin' at the bottom of the garden. The 'Vause' is a large urn known as 'the Four Seasons', which is the focal point of the south east part of the garden. The positioning of the pairs of boys (Fig. 6) caused Coke a great deal of trouble. At first he proposed to arrange them in military formation on the lawns, but he eventually decided to place them in bays cut out of the yew hedges where they still remain. Nost also supplied a figure of Mercury after Giambologna, which stands in the centre of a circle on the main axis of the garden. The stone urns and vases in the garden are the work of Watson and Devigne.

One of the unsung contributors to the Melbourne garden was George Sorocold (b1668), a pioneer hydraulic engineer who constructed a piped water supply at Derby in 1692.<sup>10</sup> At Melbourne he was responsible for supplying water to the pools and fountains. He made the fountains work using direct pressure from the mill pool, whose surface lies well



Fig. 6. A pair of cherubs.



Fig. 7. The 'Birdcage', by Robert Bakewell 1706–8. The cupola was added in 1711.

above the level of much of the garden. To this end, he raised the level of the pool by two feet, flooding part of the vicarage garden in the process. Writing to Thomas Coke in April 1706, Sorocold says: 'I visited ye Parson yesterday who seemed a little uneased about ye lower end of his Orchard being under water but upon taking a Pott or two & faire promises to fill up that part with all speed, hee begun your health in a Bumper'!

The crowning feature of the garden is the wrought iron arbour (Fig. 7) known as the 'Birdcage', which was made by the ironsmith Robert Bakewell for £120 in 1706–8 and stands at the bottom of the principal axis of the garden beyond the 'great basin'. It was made at a forge (which can be viewed by appointment) in the basement of 'Stone House', which still stands next to the parish church. The arbour made Bakewell famous, but its manufacture left him penniless. In form, it is derived from wooden arbours common in French gardens; an arbour almost identical to Bakewell's at Melbourne appears in *Le Théorie et la Pratique du Jardinage*, published in Paris in 1709. The arbour was originally painted green, but it is now black with coloured ornamentation. Bakewell went on to produce famous ironwork all over England, including the screen in Derby Cathedral and the staircase balustrade at Cholmondeley Hall in Cheshire.

In March 1710, Elizabeth Coke told her brother: 'I have not been round your Garden a great while, but Mr Moore tells me he has very near finished all the plantations, and he has had abundance of earth carried in upon that account'. By this time the garden was basically complete, but alterations continued to be made with varying intensity until Thomas Coke died in 1727, and Thomas Kirkland's plan of 1722 (Fig. 4) was apparently made in order that Thomas Coke could direct alterations more easily from London.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 8. A late 19th century view of Melbourn Pool from the parish church tower, with the Victorian Tudor miller's house of 1839 in the middle distance and the garden wall on the left. Grassed-over ridge and furrow ploughland can be seen in the distance, and the trees all along the horizon stand within the former royal hunting park.

Meanwhile, progress was being made outside the garden walls, where Thomas Coke was endeavouring to create a park; Secretary Coke had long before purchased the former Royal hunting park at Melbourne, but this was separated from the Hall and gardens by a large area of open field land in multiple ownership. The mill and the mill pool were the property of the Hastings family of nearby Donington Hall in Leicestershire, who owned the lordship of the manor of Melbourne. Thomas Coke complained that the pool had long been 'noisome and unhealthy' to the inhabitants of the hall, and in 1701 he obtained a lease of the mill and pool with liberty to drain the water completely, provided that an alternative supply could be found by using dams further upstream.<sup>12</sup> However, the supply of water to the mill was already insufficient and had been the subject of a lawsuit in the 1680s. Eventually, George Sorocold's work in 1706 mentioned above put an end to the idea. This being the case, Thomas Coke and his successors did their best to turn the pool into an aesthetic advantage. It was probably George Lewis Coke (1715–51), Thomas Coke's only son, who enclosed the strip of common land on the far side of the pool. A group of trees planted there was known as 'Dovemoor Grove', and a long-vanished summerhouse called the Temple was built in it, furnished with a marble table. A boat was kept on the pool, and the Temple and Grove were no doubt a destination of trips across the water.<sup>13</sup>

The gradual acquisition of the open field land between the royal park and the Hall gardens (Fig. 8) was a tedious business, conducted by a long series of exchanges and purchases. A plan of the old royal hunting park, the hall gardens and the intervening ploughland was made by Thomas Kirkland in 1724, and acts as a benchmark of the progress that had been made by that date. More exchanges and purchases remained to be made, but in the meantime the landscape of the royal park was being improved by new plantations and an impressive avenue of Spanish chestnuts, planted to form a vista half a mile long from the 'Four Seasons' in the garden.<sup>14</sup>

The most insuperable problem was posed by the house itself. Thomas Coke had inherited a house which was considered an eyesore, and which had not been substantially altered since 1631. Coke was troubled by the fact that the axis of his garden did not align centrally on the house, due to the restrictions and the past history of the site. At first, c1700, he planned to build a new house with its principal facades facing east and west,<sup>15</sup> but the west aspect would have been intolerably cramped by the church, the vicarage and the Hall's own outbuildings. Coke considered this problem for many years, but in the meantime he began in 1707 to make cosmetic alterations to the end of the house adjoining the garden, including new sash windows, internal fittings and alterations to the roof, which appear to have involved the substitution of hips for the existing gables. This work continued intermittently until about 1722. The house was falling into poor structural condition and needed many props; in 1708 Elizabeth Coke feared that the house was so securely propped that it would last longer than anyone alive would want it.

In 1721 Thomas Coke drafted an agreement with the vicar for the demolition of the vicarage and its replacement with another house, but the proposals were abandoned and by 1725 Coke had reluctantly concluded that the existing layout of the Hall, with principal fronts facing east and south, made the most advantageous use of the site. Accordingly, he at last resolved to remodel the house by entirely rebuilding the east and west wings and partially remodelling the north range. The west wing (Fig. 9) was rebuilt first, in 1726, to designs by Francis Smith of Warwick. It is rather conservative for its date, and has cruciform windows to its western elevation, formerly glazed with lead. The west wing determined the outline that the east wing must take, but Thomas Coke died in 1727 and his son did not come of age until 1736. It was not until 1742 that a messenger was sent 'to Warwick & other places to find Mr. Smith'. Soon after, William Smith was paid £10 for 'Journeys & makeing Draught & Estimate of Melbourne House', and the building of the east wing was done under contract by William



Fig. 9. A late 19th century view of Melbourne Hall from the parish church tower, showing the west wing of 1726 in the foreground and the east wing of 1744 behind it, with the garden and Bakewell's 'Birdcage' in the distance.



Fig. 10. A late 19th century view of the house, showing the east front of 1744 to the left and the remaining, partially remodelled north range of Secretary Coke's house to the right.

Jackson for £1500. Most of the work was complete by 1744.<sup>16</sup> The east front overlooking the garden (Fig. 10) is the best known view of Melbourne Hall, finely constructed but again rather conservative. Internally, the best feature of the east wing is the Staircase Hall (Fig. 11).

To make up for the lack of a grand facade to the west, a gatehouse was built at the south end of the stables in 1726 (Fig. 12), to drawings by Francis Smith of Warwick based on a draft by Thomas Coke. Every effort was made to persuade Smith to visit Melbourne often. Writing to Thomas Coke in May 1726, the Melbourne agent wrote: 'I would beg of you to write to Mrs Lillingson (housekeeper at Melbourne) that when Mr. Smith comes that she makes a Bed for him, and treats him Civilly for I must make soe free to acquaint that tho he is a very good natured man yet (a) small thing will disgust him as I am informed and that he will not be willing to lye at any publick house in Melbourne . . . he is very much delighted with the Gardens.' The gatehouse does not appear to have outlived the 18th century, but its profile can still be traced in a building that formerly adjoined its northern side.

In 1751, George Lewis Coke died unmarried aged 35. He was the last of his line. Melbourne passed to the Lamb family via his sister Charlotte, who had married the family lawyer, Matthew Lamb, in 1740. The Lambs were a nouveau riche family and Matthew Lamb proclaimed his new status by the purchase of Brocket Hall (Herts) in 1746. Melbourne thus once more became a secondary seat and was rarely visited by its owners. Brocket Hall was rebuilt on a grand scale, but at Melbourne the emphasis was placed firmly on maintaining the status quo. In the late 1820s and 30s Melbourne Hall was the home of George Lamb, brother of Queen Victoria's Prime Minister William Lamb 2nd Lord Melbourne (1779–1848), but for most of the nineteenth century the house and garden were let out.



Fig. 11. A late 19th century view of the staircase hall.

The grounds enjoyed an Indian Summer in the 1830s and '40s when Lord Melbourne paid frequent visits, particularly after his fall from the premiership in 1841. In 1842–6 the mill pool was reformed by the engineer James Davidson of Ashby de la Zouch. Dovemoor Grove was extended into a long fringe of woodland now known as the 'Intake', and two islands were created in the pool, planted with trees and shrubs on the advice of William Pontey, a Huddersfield landscape gardener. Pontey also designed a new terrace in the garden, near the mill, stocked with American plants. In the park, an avenue of trees was planted to form a perimeter ride (now partly destroyed), and in 1834–40 new home farm buildings were erected in the park to replace the old buildings at the Hall.<sup>17</sup>

In 1905 the family returned permanently to Melbourne and the garden was restored. It is interesting to speculate how Secretary Coke would have regarded his old home if he could have returned at the dawn of the 20th century. It was certainly vastly changed. The 'noisome' old mill pool was transformed into a beautiful ornamental lake; upon the Parliamentary Enclosure of Melbourne in 1787–91, it had become the property of the estate, and the public road around the pool was closed at the same time to be replaced by a new road elsewhere. The size of the garden had multiplied several times and the ploughland in the distance was converted to private pasture. Had the Melbourne branch of the Coke family not become extinct, the grounds and park might well have gone through several more phases of development. But if tranquillity, privacy, serenity and beauty were in Secretary Coke's mind as long term aims for Melbourne, there can be no doubt that his successors in large measure achieved it.

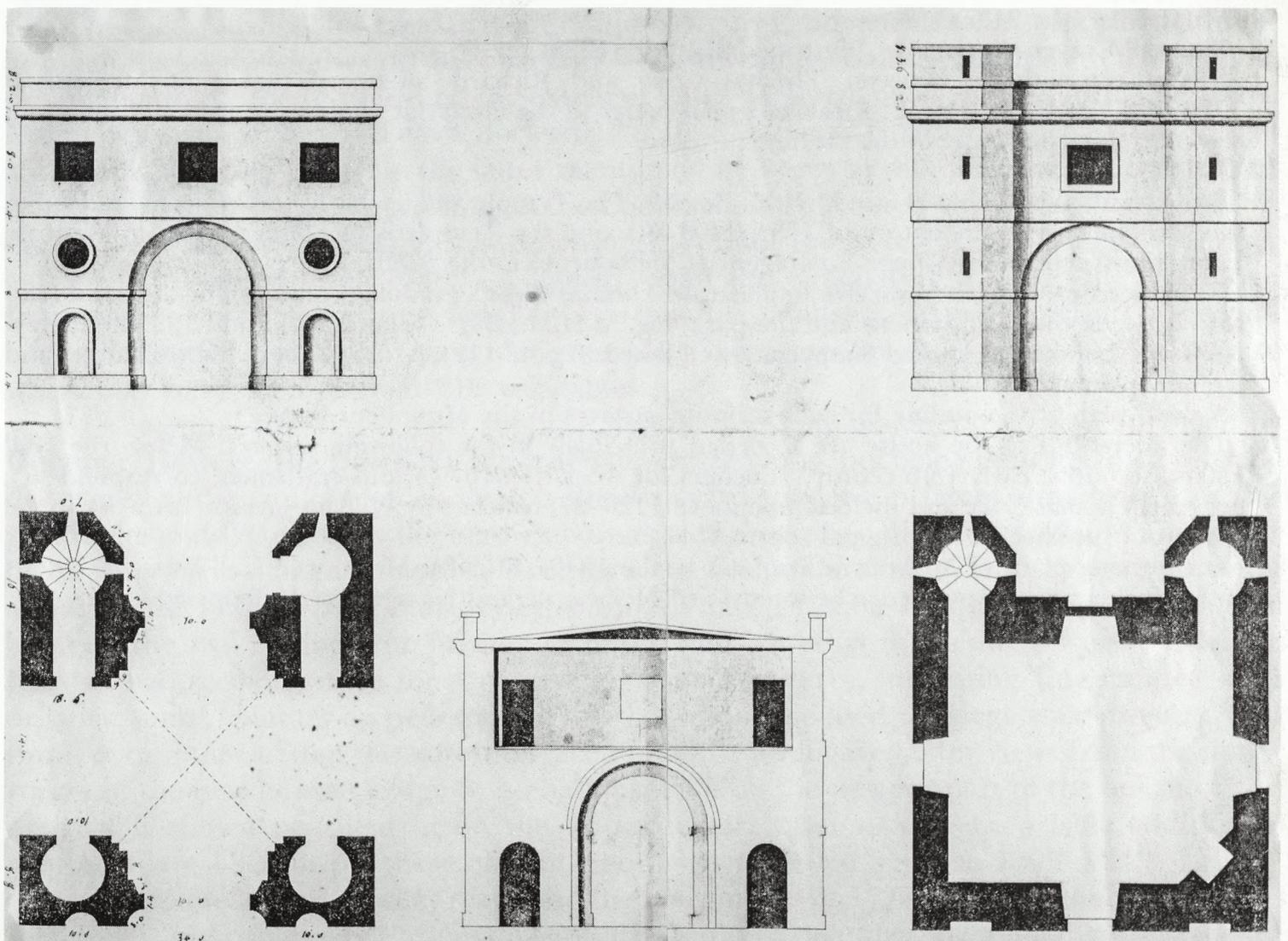


Fig. 12. Smith of Warwick's plan of the gatehouse, 1726. The main elevation, with low turrets, faced towards the parish church.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Lord and Lady Ralph Kerr, Edward Saunders, Howard and Lindsay Usher. Figs 2, 6 and 7 by courtesy of Derbyshire Countryside Ltd; Fig. 4 by courtesy of Christie's; Figs. 5, 10, 11 and 12 by courtesy of Lord and Lady Ralph Kerr and Melbourne Civic Society; Figs. 8 and 9 by courtesy of Melbourne Civic Society.

## NOTES

1. C. Bruyn Andrews (ed) 'The Torrington Diaries 1781-94' (1935).
2. Melbourne Hall Muniments (hereafter M.H.M.) Box 11 Bundle 10. The deeds concerning Secretary Coke's purchase of Sir Francis Needham's freehold estate at Melbourne are in Box 11 Bundle 1. Some earlier leases of Melbourne Rectory, which throw light on the house in the 1590s, are in the Harpur Crewe archive at the Derbyshire Record Office (D2375M 53/5).
3. The deeds to 'Stone House' by the parish church (M.H.M. 8/1/1-21) refer to the 'washing well'. An undated plan of Melbourne Pool in the early 18th century (M.H.M.) shows the horsewash.
4. M.H.M. Correspondence; 192/1.
5. The deed for the closure of the lane in 1647 is M.H.M. 11/9/10. Inside the cover of a 'Booke of Severall Accompts' is written: 'Melbourne: Sixteene Dozen of Crayfishes putt into the Brooke in the Hallyards' (i.e. at Blackwall Hall P.E.H.) 2 March 1647. The wall was begun the same winter about Xmas. John Coke.' In March 1647/8, Sir John arranged for the purchase and demolition of a house between the hall gardens and the mill pool, presumably to make way for the new garden (M.H.M. 15/5/5-6). This transaction is apparently the one referred to in Thomas Dugmore's 'Observations on the Inclosure of the Manor of Melbourne' (1800).
6. The 1698 plan hangs in the library at Melbourne Hall. The correspondence about the conversion of the Rectory from leasehold to freehold is M.H.M. Box 3 Bundle 7.
7. M.H.M. 219/4/81.
8. M.H.M. 219/8/3.
9. M.H.M. In Box 219.
10. Maxwell Craven 'Derby: An Illustrated History' (1988) pp. 66-67.
11. See correspondence between Thomas Coke and Richard Shepperd (agent at Melbourne) 1720-1727, M.H.M., 219/12. Kirkland's plan hangs in the library at Melbourne Hall and there is a second, unfinished copy in the muniment room.
12. M.H.M. 11/9/2.
13. The lawsuit about the mill is in M.H.M. Box 59. The Temple and its marble table are mentioned in the Melbourne Hall Inventory of 1751 (M.H.M.), and the Temple is mentioned again in Matthew Lamb's instructions to William Fox (agent at Melbourne) in the 1750s.
14. Many deeds of exchange survive to illustrate Thomas Coke's gradual acquisition of the open field land between the Hall gardens and the park, e.g. M.H.M., Box 14, bundles 11 and 12. The correspondence between Coke and Shepperd (mentioned in note 11) says much about the exchanges and the new plantations.
15. A draft plan of the outline for such a house survives in the Muniment Room.
16. The alterations to the house are recorded principally in the following sources: Melbourne Hall Estate Accounts; early 18th century vouchers for work done by various craftsmen; correspondence between Thomas Coke and Richard Shepperd 1720-27; contract by William Jackson for work to the house not specified in his original contract, 1744.
17. Engineering plans of Melbourne Pool etc. in the 1840s, M.H.M.; Melbourne Hall Estate Accounts and Vouchers; correspondence between Lord Melbourne and his agent at Melbourne.