
Adam Holt (1691?-1750), Gardener: His Work at Coopersale House, Essex

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NOTE

ADAM HOLT (1691?–1750), GARDENER: HIS WORK AT COOPERSALE HOUSE, ESSEX

The name of Adam Holt flits elusively across the pages of works on garden history, but until recently he has been recognized more as a nurseryman than as a garden designer. Surprisingly little is known about him, even though he held what was certainly a prestigious position as ‘gardiner’ and ‘surveyor of the works’ to Sir Richard Child at Wanstead House, Essex, in the early eighteenth century.

Holt is said to have been born in 1691¹ and as early as 1710 he was paying rates in Leytonstone, Essex, on a large piece of ground near Grove Green, which was presumably where he established his nursery.² Richard Bradley refers to ‘the curious Mr. Adam Holt, Gardener to the late Bishop of London’ (d.1713),³ but as evidence so far points to Holt being established in Essex, it may be that his connection with Henry Compton was as a supplier of plants rather than as a gardener. Possibly it was through the bishop that he met George London, the accredited Gardener at Fulham Palace. The diary of an unidentified Quaker in Wanstead records that ‘Mr. Adam Holt (Sir Richard Child’s Gardiner) begun June 3rd 1713 to put Gardiners and Labourers into my ffield to make a Canal and Kitchin Garden’,⁴ which suggests that Holt was already employed by Child, perhaps supervising the work on London’s grand design for Wanstead, and at the same time designing or overseeing new gardens elsewhere. Smart Lethieullier, owner of Aldersbrook Manor, an estate adjacent to Wanstead, wrote a letter in 1746 (which was published in *Archaeologia* in 1779) in which he refers to Holt as being in 1715 ‘the then surveyor of the works’ at Wanstead.⁵ London had died by that time, and possibly some of the later features in Wanstead Park were the creation of Holt; for instance, the polygonal pond (which contained the Britain island), shown on John Rocque’s engraving ‘A Plan of the House, Gardens, Park and Plantations of Wanstead in Essex, the Seat of the Earl of Tylney’ (1735), was a device used elsewhere by Holt. He also constructed an octagonal end to a canal at Hedingham Castle, Essex, perhaps adapted from London’s design for Wanstead. There was also an elaborate modelling of the east end of the Wanstead long canal, including another octagonal pond with a miniature fort on an island, a feature

which first appears on a map of 1725⁶ and is still shown on the Rocque engraving.

Holt’s nursery business continued to flourish: in 1720 he sent fruit trees to Staffordshire to the West Bromwich estate of Sir Samuel Clarke,⁷ and achieved considerable success in the breeding of an *Auricula*.⁸ He also practised surveying, and in 1723 he mapped the Lethieullier property of Aldersbrook.⁹ In 1726 he undertook garden construction further north at Hedingham for Robert Ashurst, who was continuing his father’s work on a new house in the castle grounds. The plan that Holt submitted with his specification is missing, but the text of the agreement describes the work to be undertaken, including ‘an octogon Bason of 156 feet diameter [added] unto a Shank of a Canal already made’, with a turfed counter walk, slope and terrace above it.¹⁰ He was also to make the coach way ‘circuler and Levell’, and to ensure that the water was seen from the court by lowering the front lawn between the road and the basin. It is perhaps surprising that although he was to dig holes for the avenue trees, the trees and carriage to Hedingham were specifically excepted.

This layout can be seen on a survey of 1766 by George Sangster (Figure 1),¹¹ and it shows the similarity of the canal with octagon end — still surviving albeit without its original crisp outlines — with the first canal-and-octagon pond at Wanstead.

Holt continued to pay rates as a non-resident on a small piece of land in Leytonstone until 1733, but by 1728 he had moved from Leytonstone to Wanstead, where he remained for the rest of his life.¹² His properties are marked on a plan of turnpike roads¹³ at Wanstead Bridge, and also just before the Green Man public house.

The recent discovery in a private archive¹⁴ of an early eighteenth-century plan for a polygonal pond and garden design led to the realisation that the missing design by Holt for garden improvements at Coopersale House, Essex, had been found (Figure 2). This estate near Epping was bought in the late sixteenth century by the Archer family, and Coopersale House was built at the end of the seventeenth century. William Archer, who inherited the property in 1707,¹⁵ embarked on major garden alterations in 1738, for which an account survives.¹⁶ This document makes it clear that there was already an existing pond at Coopersale, which Holt was to reshape by ‘Removeing from the South West side of the Pond unto the severall Slopes to

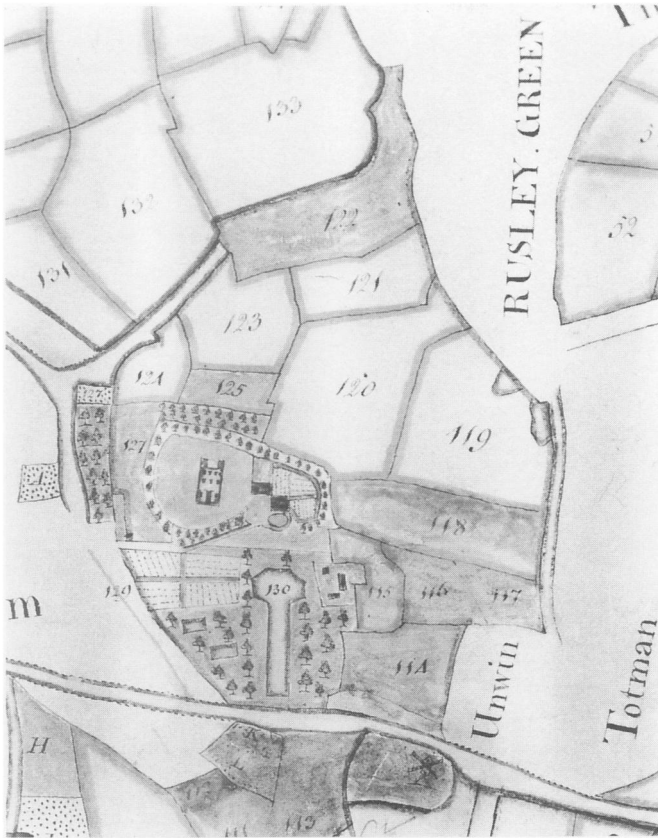


Figure 1. Detail of a survey of Heddingham Castle, Essex, by George Sangster (1766).

Courtesy of the Essex Record Office

make the Water Lines and water Slopes of twenty five Graduation, making a Counter Walk Round of five foot wide with a Large Upper slope', leaving all the ground 'fit for Grass'. The Grand Terras was also to be left 'fit for turff or hay seed'. In a letter of September 1738, Holt writes that they are 'stocking of Gravell and ballis [ballast] for ye watter Lines, . . . and carting of the Clay for ye Great Slope next the town in ye Avuney [avenue]'. The work had been costed at £230, and Holt asked for £40 to finish the outstanding details, which was paid in the same month.

The reference at the bottom of the plan (in the same hand as the account) allows the finished design to be visualized. The south façade of the house gave on to a terrace (the 'House Terras'), with central steps leading down the slope to a parterre. To the right was the kitchen garden in the unusual form of a long, thin triangle, bisected by a path with access from the west side of the parterre. The terrace continued round the parterre along its east side, giving a view from the higher level. Running beside the kitchen garden to the north was a 'bowlen green', bordered by a 'shady walk' in the form of a close-planted, narrow avenue which widened beyond the end of the kitchen garden and

led to a 'forsea' (*fossé*) to give a continuous vista down the Grand Avenue to the west. The *fossé* was 'to be 16 feet wide at Top and 4 feet wide at Bottom 5 feet deep with a 5 feet pail in the Bottom', with a 'Foot way Round the north End'.

Returning to the parterre, an opening in the south wall led to a wide terrace above one of the short sides of the pond, turning west to run between a long side of the pond and the kitchen garden. The fall of the land allowed a sophisticated arrangement of slopes and 'counter walks' round the pond, giving the formal but asymmetrical shape much variety and interest on the perimeter. The terrace walk along the east side of the pond ran along the boundary of the property ('Cooper Sail Street'), which was to be protected with an 'outward Fence . . . of a Strong Clift Pail with 2 Railes 5 feet high sharp pointed' and backed with a hornbeam hedge. Where the terrace walk turned round the head of the pond, the Epping road was screened by 'a thicket', with just a vista through it on an axis with the south front of the house, from which the view from the 'House Terras' would have been over the parterre and pond to the countryside beyond. The Little Stew closed the thicket on the west, and the

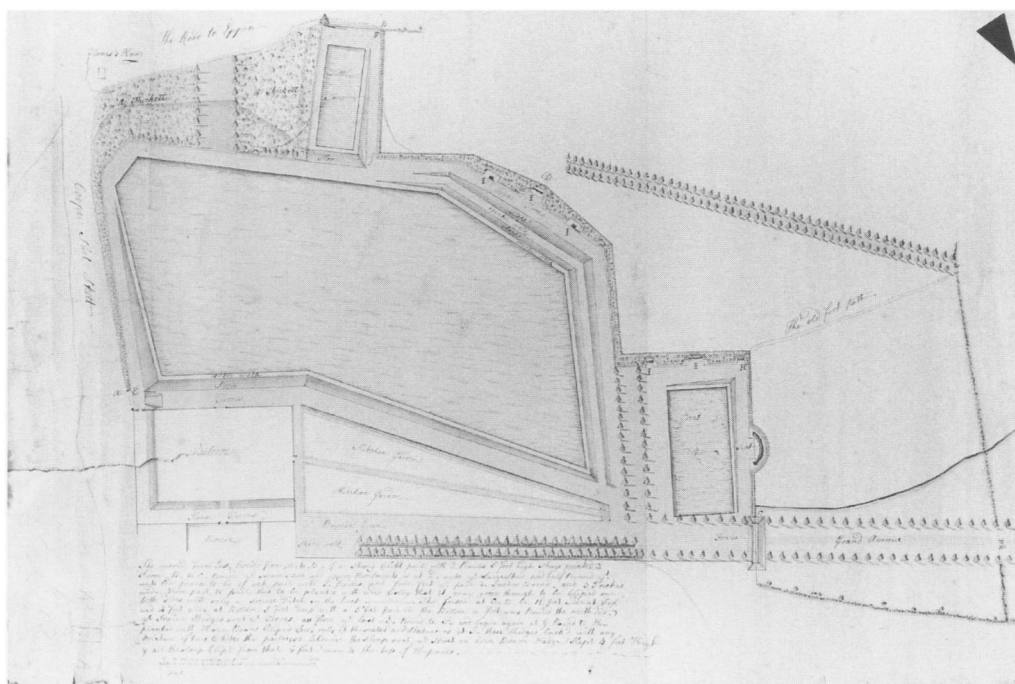


Figure 2. Left-hand side of a plan for the garden at Coopersale House, Essex, possibly by Adam Holt (undated, but relating to the account of 1738); note that north is at bottom.

Courtesy of Mr James Puxley and the Berkshire Record Office

terrace walk continued round another canted corner of the pond, here with two counter walks and two slopes down to the water. The upper terrace was backed with a clipped wild holly hedge growing through the pales, and where the 'Recesments' enclosed seats and statues the hedges were to be 'back'd with any mixture of trees to hide the pails', which was also specified for the recesses along the south of the Great Stew. A wide elliptical seat on the west side would have had a view across the rectangular pond to a short avenue on the other side, effectively making it into an outside room.

The main design of the garden was contained in the area east of the *fossé* (Figure 2) to the south of the house. At the far end of the Grand Avenue a statue closed the view, but beyond a small, irregularly shaped 'Bottle Pond' and a piece of woodland, both lying south of the avenue, there was no further garden design.

These tantalizing glimpses of a modest contributor to the late geometric layout make it probable that this was not the sum total of Holt's work.

Other gardens in Essex, if not elsewhere, which at present lack an identified designer but are recorded on estate maps of the early eighteenth century, could possibly be by him. Was he responsible for the garden at Aldersbrook, where Richard Pococke commented in 1750 that Smart Lethieullier had 'made a very pretty improvement',¹⁷ or perhaps at Ruckholt,¹⁸ which between 1721 and 1728 was given not only a canal shaped like an elongated keyhole with an octagonal end, but also a short *allée* with an octagonal turning point at its end, both features highly suggestive of Holt? Ruckholt was close to Grove Green in Leytonstone where Holt lived at that time.

Holt's only known activity after 1738 is in the field of estate mapping: he 'surveyed and drew' the manor of Marls for Mrs Priscilla Blake in 1743,¹⁹ but there is no suggestion that this is anything other than a straight-forward record of the property.

Any further information on Adam Holt would be gladly received by the Essex Gardens Trust.

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REFERENCES

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2. Described in John Harvey, *Early Nurserymen* (London: Phillimore, 1974), 81.
3. Richard Bradley, *New Improvements of Planting and Gardening*, pt II, 3rd corrected edn (London, 1720), under 'Of the Maracoc, or Passion-Tree'.
4. ERO, D/DK F1.
5. 'A letter from Smart Lethieullier, Esq., to Dr. Charles Lyttelton, relating to some antiquities found in the County of Essex', *Archaeologia*, 1 (1779); read 27 November 1746.
6. ERO, D/DCW P7.
7. Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, 81. See also a letter from Holt to Clarke of 15 December 1720, quoted in Miles Hadfield, *A History of British Gardening* (London: John Murray, 1979), 169.
8. Robert Furber, *The Flower Garden Display'd* (London, 1734).
9. ERO, D/DSA 150. Aldersbrook also appears on a survey of 1740, 'A Plan of the Mannors of Wanstead and Aldersbrook, where they are contiguous on each other', on which the canal or 'Great Pond' is more regular in outline; *ibid.*, D/DSQ 152.
10. *Ibid.*, D/DMh F 31.
11. *Ibid.*, D/DMh P3.
12. A. Stuart Mason, *Essex on the Map* (Chelmsford: Essex County Council, 1990), 53. Mason gives a short account of Holt as a surveyor.
13. ERO, T/M 128.
14. The Archer Houlblon archive is deposited on loan at the Berkshire Record Office, Reading: the Coopersale plan (Figure 2) is at D/EAH acc. 6199/21.
15. See the *Victoria County History: Essex*, vol. IV (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956) for an account of the Archer Houlblon family.
16. ERO, D/DU 363/4, f.93.
17. J. J. Cartwright (ed.), *The Travels through England of Dr. Richard Pococke* (London: Camden Society, new series XLII, 1888–89), vol. 1, 80.
18. Ruckholt Manor was surveyed by Thomas Archer (ERO, T/M 393) for Benjamin Collier in 1721 just after he bought the estate, and again by Richard Cushee (*ibid.*, D/DCY P3A) in 1728 after the garden improvements. Collier's mortgager foreclosed on him in 1731, and later that year Ruckholt was sold to the Tylneys.
19. *Ibid.*, D/DW P 4.