

Background: History of the estate

Formation of the house and estate

The estate was founded by Thomas Parr around 1830. Thomas was born in 1792 into an old-established Lancashire family with banking interests in Warrington. Parr's Bank was very successful, and eventually became part of NatWest. One of the old branches with a fine **banking hall remains as the NatWest on Winwick Street in Warrington** town centre, **(see modern photograph)**.

The land which made up the estate had been farmed in smaller units. Thomas bought the land, including Witherwin Farm and what became Dairy Farm, over a period of some years, until he eventually owned an area of around 150 acres.

From the **Ordnance Survey (OS) Maps of 1875 and 1899**, we can see that the house was built in a raised location in the centre of the land to give impressive views over the parkland. Formal gardens surrounded the house on three sides **(see old photographs)** and made an attractive setting with lawns, terraces and a bowling green. The **site of the house can still be seen just north of the garden**, marked by stone blocks from the parapet **(see old photograph)** which remained on the site.

A west lodge and drive (still present) formed an appropriately impressive approach to the house. To the south and west, areas of parkland formed a backdrop to the gardens, while **stables and other buildings (site only)** were concentrated to the east to keep the other views clear of obstructions.

In creating the parkland it appears that Thomas used many existing features such as individual trees, copses and ponds in the park to enhance the setting of the house. He used the features from the farmland around his house to design a parkland landscape. This in turn formed a transition from his gardens to the more distant surrounding farmland.

Many of these landscape features of the park and farmland remain today, as ponds, individual trees and woodland. We are therefore benefiting not only from Thomas's landscape legacy, but from that of earlier generations.

The House and Estate through the 19th century

We only have snapshots of the estate at certain times when accurate records were made, usually in the form of **OS Maps**, so we cannot be certain of the precise timing of some developments.

The third of Thomas's surviving sons Joseph Charlton Parr inherited Grappenhall Heys in 1870, (the oldest inherited a Scottish estate and the second was a soldier killed at Sebastopol). Joseph too was a very wealthy man, a prominent figure in Parr's Bank and Mayor of Warrington in 1901-3. He gave the **Parr Hall** to the people of Warrington in **1896**, and this was recorded in the **Warrington Guardian Yearbook** for that year, **(also see modern photograph)**. A summary of his life and contribution to Warrington can be found in the extract of the **Warrington Guardian Yearbook for 1902**.

Comparing the OS Maps of **1875 and 1899**, one of the few changes Joseph made seems to have been **the construction of the north east lodge** and re-routing the north east drive,

both still on Broad Lane. He also **added the Lime avenue along the southern drive to Keeper's Cottage. Both the north lodge and part of the avenue remain today.**

Roger Parr and the Staff, 1932

Joseph moved out of the house in 1918 and died in the early 1920s in his 80s. On Joseph's death the estate passed to his son, Roger Charlton Parr. A summary of his life can be found in the extract of the **Warrington Guardian Yearbook for 1912**. Roger at that time was living at Springfield, a large house on Broad Lane, the northern edge of his father's estate near Grappenhall village.

Roger Parr chose the front entrance porch as the backdrop for a **photograph with his male members of staff**, which we believe was taken in 1932. Roger is the central, tallest figure on the back row. The porch juts out from the rest of the house, facing the track through the woodland. **You can stand in the same place as the people in the photograph.**

Even though this photograph excludes the female staff such as maids, it can be seen that in 1932 the Parrs still employed a significant number of people.

The major social upheavals of this time can be guessed at, in that few of the men are middle-aged; they are either younger or much older. This could be due to both the toll of the First World War, and the increasing reluctance to be employed 'in service.'

David Masterton, Head Gardener - a life's work

The earliest photographs we have of **David Masterton** are probably taken in **his 30s**. From the **Census** we know that David was working at Grappenhall Heys as the Head Gardener in **1901** and he was 36 years old then.

The other photograph shows David as a much older man, but presumably still working at Grappenhall Heys; this theory is supported by the Parr's staff photograph.

David Masterton appears to be on the **staff photograph**. If this was taken in 1932, he would be 67. We think he is third from the right on the front row. **Do you think this is him?**

Climbing the gardening ladder

We believe that on one of the **photographs David is with the 'Inside Foreman' and 'Outside Foreman.'** These titles must have referred to areas of the garden, presumably one foreman was in charge of the glasshouses and the other in charge of the kitchen garden, if not the pleasure grounds as well.

This is an interesting record of the hierarchy of gardeners that was employed in Victorian times. This hierarchy was necessary because there were so many gardeners, compared to the number we could afford to employ today.

Under the foreman, there were probably gardeners, journeyman gardeners, apprentices and boys. Journeyman gardeners and apprentices moved around from one garden to further their careers.

Gardeners had attained professional status, and would probably be employed in a situation for longer periods. They might then look for the more senior posts of foreman and head gardener.

How do we know about David Masterton?

The photographs of the Mastertons were kindly given to us by his great grand-daughter. She now lives some distance away from Warrington, but returned to see the garden where he worked.

We are delighted with the photographs because they give us a personal record of, and some insight into, an important member of the Parr's staff.

The Census, a mine of information

There is also documentary evidence for the Masterton family at Grappenhall Heys, because they are recorded in the **1901 Census**, living at Home Farm. This must have been a property owned by the Parrs and made available as living accommodation for staff who needed to live close to their employer's house, for example so that they could easily and quickly get to the garden.

The Census contains a lot of information, such as **who was in that household, their ages, occupations and where they were born**. The names and ages of the four Masterton children are given on the Census. This is very useful to those of us carrying out research, either into family history or local history, for the Garden and area.

The **1891 Census** shows who was living in the Parr's house Grappenhall Heys, at that time, so we can see how many live-in servants they employed, and their details.

Background: History of the walled garden

The site before the Walled Garden

Marl pits are shown on the 1829 Grappenhall Tithe Map in approximately the same places as they are found as ponds in the walled garden. Marl is a calcium-rich deposit which is found under much of Cheshire and which, when spread over the surface, adds nutrients to the soil and raises its pH. As a handy by-product, it creates ponds which are useful for watering cattle.

Spreading marl over large areas by cart was time-consuming and expensive, so it was often carried out from numerous small pits rather than large, central sites. This led to marl pits being dotted all over the Cheshire landscape - over 40,000 such ponds were recorded late in the 19th century, and it is fair to assume that there were originally more.

The evolution of the Walled Garden

The walled garden consists - in a way believed to be unique in the region - of both a formal, rectangular kitchen garden and informal pleasure grounds containing the three ponds.

Although it is not certain, it seems likely that the kitchen garden was built first and enclosed by a wall. **An OS map of 1855 appears to show only the rectangular kitchen garden within the walls, with the ponds outside.**

This suggests that the pleasure grounds were included within the enclosed area at a later date, within a new wall extension, and that a yew hedge was planted to replace the original wall dividing the two areas. **Although not certain, this seems to have taken place by the time of the next OS map in 1875.**

The heyday of the Kitchen Garden

The kitchen garden was almost certainly built when the estate was formed in the early 1830s to provide **fruit, vegetables and flowers (see on site)** for the owner's table.

Few estates were without a kitchen garden, and there was considerable rivalry to have the most impressive and productive garden in the area. Labour and fuel were relatively cheap, so Estate owners could enjoy a wide range of produce, including some fairly exotic species such as peaches, pineapples and out-of-season foods which were grown in heated greenhouses. Grapes at Christmas were a particular challenge to the Head Gardener!

To beat the chilly Cheshire climate a range of **greenhouses were built along the sunniest, south-facing**, side of the Garden, and **extended in the late 19th century, (compare the 1875 and 1899 OS maps)**. These would have housed the more exotic produce which required warmth.

A range of brick-buildings known as **the back-sheds (visit on site)** behind the greenhouses would have provided stores, potting sheds, **a bothy and privy** for the gardeners and probably a Head Gardener's office. These were an important part of the working area of the garden. The bothy was living accommodation for the gardener who had to be in the garden at all times, to keep the boilers stoked with fuel. The **1901 Census** records 18 year old gardener John Massey living at the **'Gardener's Bothy'**.

Around the edge of the kitchen garden fruit trees would have been trained up the walls, fruiting at different times depending on how much sun they caught - i.e. which way they faced, **(see the Pears on site)**.

In the main part of the kitchen garden a network of paths would have passed between the growing beds, both to allow the gardeners to reach the plants, and to allow the Head Gardener and owner to inspect the produce. The 'master's walk' in front of the glasshouses **(see old photograph)** was particularly ornamental.

The heyday of the Pleasure Grounds

Separated from the kitchen garden by a **yew hedge - which is still in place**, and now restored - the pleasure grounds are much more unusual for a walled garden.

They contain relatively informal water bodies, based on the original marl pits but probably reshaped and extended. Between **the ponds (see on site)** were specimen trees and other forms of planting. Some of the plants have survived, as the mature trees, Rhododendrons and Hollies show on site.

The pleasure grounds were contained within the same boundary wall, but were accessible through a separate entrance from the house, **see the gate at the end of the Holly Walk**. The owners presumably did not always want to see food-growing activities in the kitchen garden!

Once in the pleasure grounds, **a path followed the boundary around the edge of the ponds (a route which is now only accessible in the Holly Walk)** before returning to the house either directly or along the master's walk in the kitchen garden.

The Parrs appear to have enjoyed keeping waterfowl, and later in the life of the estate some 43 species were recorded, so perhaps this explains why the pleasure grounds were incorporated within the walled area. The birds must have provided an added attraction for a walk round the ponds, as **the wild birds** still do today.

Background: The last 50 years

The departure of the Parrs

On Roger's death the estate passed to his son Major Henry Charles Parr, who already had a house in Oxfordshire. Grappenhall Heys seems not to have been lived in by the family after 1941, and it appears it was used by the W.R.N.S. for part of the war. It was presumably associated with the Royal Navy base at Stretton, H.M.S. Blackcap.

Although details are sketchy, it seems reasonable to assume that the estate suffered the same pressures of wartime wear-and-tear, post-war austerity, scarce labour and rising costs which led to so many country houses being demolished or sold after the Second World War.

In 1950 several buildings - including the East Lodge and Keeper's Cottage - were sold, the beginning of a process which ultimately led to the break-up of the Estate. The farms and other structures were also sold around this time to a variety of buyers. The house and formal gardens were finally sold in 1951, (**see Warrington Guardian April 17 1951**) for £7,500, to the British Transport Commission.

As the life of the estate declined in the 20th century, the need for the walled garden reduced. Fortunately it was allowed to 'hibernate' rather than being destroyed, as many were, so key historical elements such as paths, greenhouses and some plants were not lost.

In the 1950s, when the other estate buildings and the farms were sold, the walled garden was gifted to Mr. Power, a former employee, who is known to have used it to raise poultry.

Finally, after a period as a furniture depository, the house and surrounding land was taken over by the Warrington-Runcorn Development Corporation in 1975. The life of the estate was, after 145 years, now at an end.

Threats

When the house, grounds and walled garden came into the ownership of Warrington-Runcorn Development Corporation they were a sad sight. The house, stables and other structures were dilapidated and dangerous; they were soon demolished and the site cleared.

It was intended that the walled garden would be built on once development began. However, a group of concerned local people formed the Grappenhall Heys Walled Garden Conservation Group to campaign for the walled garden site to be spared and retained as a community resource.

Restoration and Renewal

After a determined campaign the Conservation Group prevailed, and the Development Corporation - later the Commission for the New Towns - undertook essential works to clear and stabilise the site. The boundary walls were rebuilt, new gates installed and the basic safety works carried out on the greenhouses. The brick buildings behind the greenhouses were largely rebuilt. Abandoned cars and other debris were removed and the area was made more secure.

The formal gardens were by then covered in self-set trees. The site of the house was cleared and can still be seen just north of the garden, marked by stone blocks from the parapet which remained on the site. It was handed over to the Woodland Trust, along with other wooded areas of the former Estate.

The Warrington Organic Gardening and Wildlife Society (WOWGS) began to cultivate the original kitchen karden, growing vegetables and fruit on a gradually increasing scale, and over time reclaimed most of the growing area. News paths have been created and a centrepiece feature of herbs for the kitchen garden has been planted.

The silted-up ponds in the pleasure grounds were dug out - so deep that the diggers disappeared below ground level! - and the water flow reinstated. Scrub clearance and tree surgery restored the framework of the planting in the pleasure grounds, and some of the old paths were cleared and can be walked again.

The overgrown yew hedge separating the kitchen garden from the pleasure grounds was severely cut back and (after a nerve-racking wait before it re-grew) is now carefully maintained to form a tidy and solid boundary between the two sections of the garden, as it did in the Parr's time.

A new use for the Garden

Of course, new patterns of use require changes to the layout which the Parrs would not recognise. The main example is the new north-south brick path and associated structures, designed to enable the pleasure grounds to accommodate people passing through the garden between the new housing and Witherwin Avenue.

A phased programme of planting in both kitchen garden and pleasure grounds is gradually restoring the lush vegetation and productive varieties - such as old species of fruit trees - which would have characterised the walled garden in its heyday.

In 2005 the latest phase of renewal began with the garden's transfer to Grappenhall and Thelwall Parish Council. The Parish Council continues to develop the walled garden as a tranquil, atmospheric and historic resource for the community.