

# Longthorpe Holy Well

by Donald Mackreth and Francis O'Neill

Direct documentary evidence referring to Holy Well is unfortunately scanty. The dating for the garden-remains arrived at from maps shows that the scheme was in being after c.1765 and before c.1800.

On topographical, archeological and documentary grounds (the last being a survey of the Old Manor), it seems clear that the complex of ponds and earthworks was not in existence before 1649. Oliver St John, Cromwell's Lord Chief Justice, acquired this land in Longthorpe in 1653 and began building Thorpe Hall in that year. On the death of the last St John, Mary, in 1793, the estate passed to the Earls Fitzwilliam. The evidence is that the St Johns were responsible for the pond complex.

As to Holy Well: there appears to be evidence for two schemes. The first is noted by J. Bridges, c.1720, who refers to it as lying 'in the park at some distance from the house' and he says that the water rises in a 'rock or grotto'. The second is shown on maps dated c.1765-85 and is a revitalisation of the area by the well. In 1756 Mary St John married Sir John Bernard and they had a son, Robert. Either of these baronets could have been responsible for the work; but on balance it was probably Sir John.

The form of the name Holy Well was Holwell in 1632 and 1649, and Bridges in 1720 calls it Hallywell. The meaning seems to be 'the well in the hollow'. The late eighteenth-century maps give Holy Well and divide the complex into Upper and Lower Holy Well.

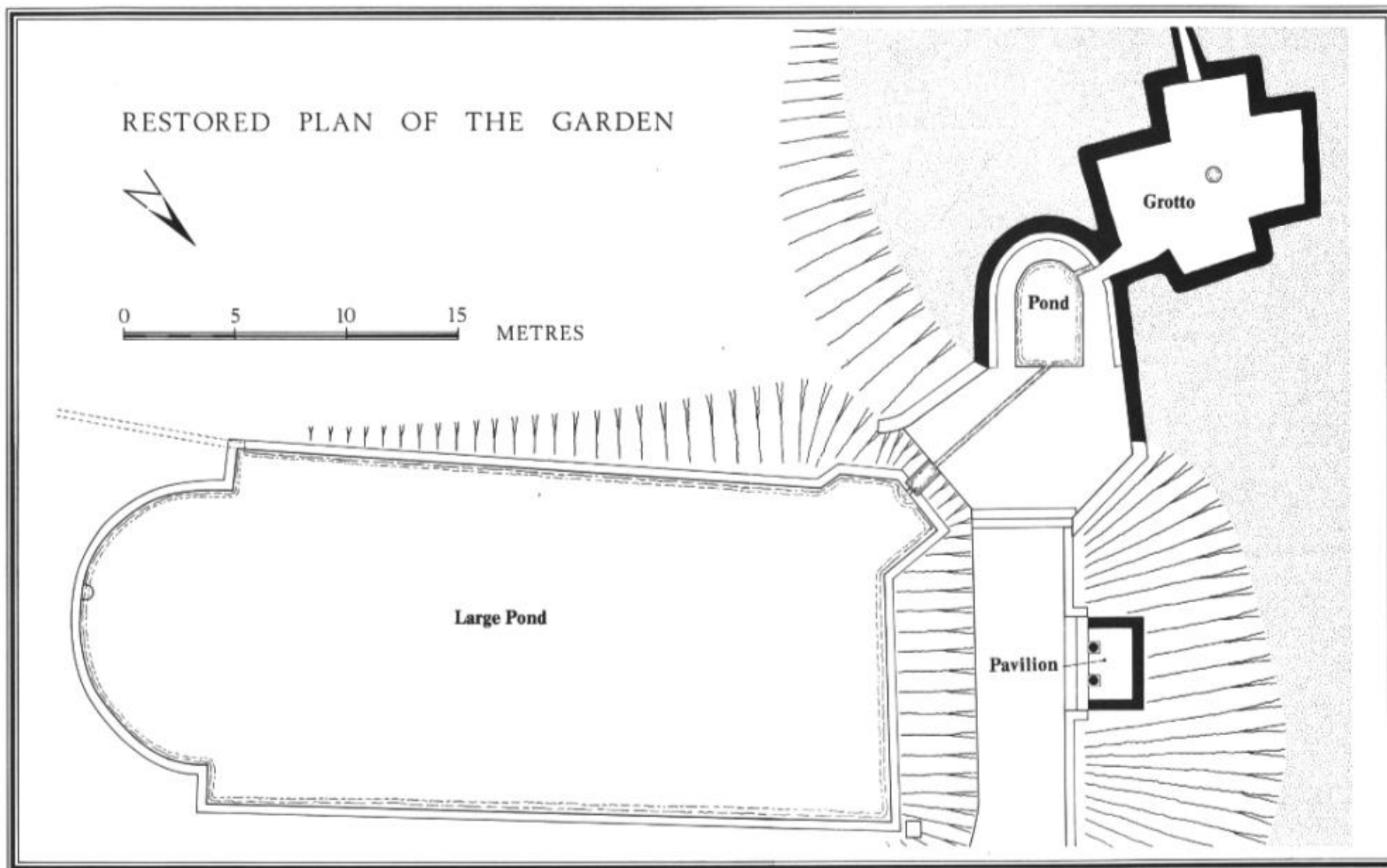
The idea that the waters were medicinal probably encouraged the Rev. A. J. Skrimshire to build outside the grotto entrance a distillery for the production of peppermint water, oil of caraway and other items such as extract of Henbane and Belladonna.

The eighteenth-century garden, remodelled, consists of a Grotto lit by an 'eye' directly over a circular well into which the water is led rather than rises (fig. 25). The water ran under the floor of the Grotto and emerged to fall into a secluded pool, rectangular at one end and apsidal at the other. Around the pool was a walkway with a seat along the sides and round the apse. The water then ran along an open channel and down into a trough from which it splashed into the large pond. From here it was taken by a concealed exit into the rest of the pond complex.

The large pond was rectangular and had a relieved apse at the far end from the pavilion and terrace which gave access to the small pool and Grotto. The distribution of the water, the stone revetments for the two ponds and the terrace all mark this scheme off from the rest of the pond complex. The whole forms a water garden of markedly classical cast, most probably enhanced by statuary and possibly mock-ruin fragments. A plinth which could have supported a statue is still on the site.

Since the last war the garden-remains have suffered very badly and it is fortunate that photographs survive showing the stonework round the apse of the small pool. The style of this is Greek rather than Roman. A woodcut made in the middle of last century, which shows the distillery, reveals that the pavilion had columns in a version of Greek Ionic. The use of these features should date after the publication of the first volume of Stewart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* in 1762 which is usually taken to be the starting point for the use of Greek detailing in English architecture. Thus the stylistic date falls into the same time-bracket as the maps which show the large and small ponds. Failing family documents which would help to pin-point which of the Bernards commissioned the work, it would require a great labour to discover who the architect was; such a design would be accounted a minor work and all the drawings could easily have been discarded.

It is possible that the Grotto belongs to an earlier period, following Bridge's comment. Certainly the internal walls are secondary, inserted most probably to support the vault, which, as fig. 25 shows, has an irregular plan. By 1900 the site had become deserted and was well known earlier this century as a local picnic spot. If the Development Corporation's plans are successful, the site will become a local resort again and will preserve something of the form of the classical garden.



*Fig 25 Plan of the ponds and grotto at Holy Well, Longthorpe*