

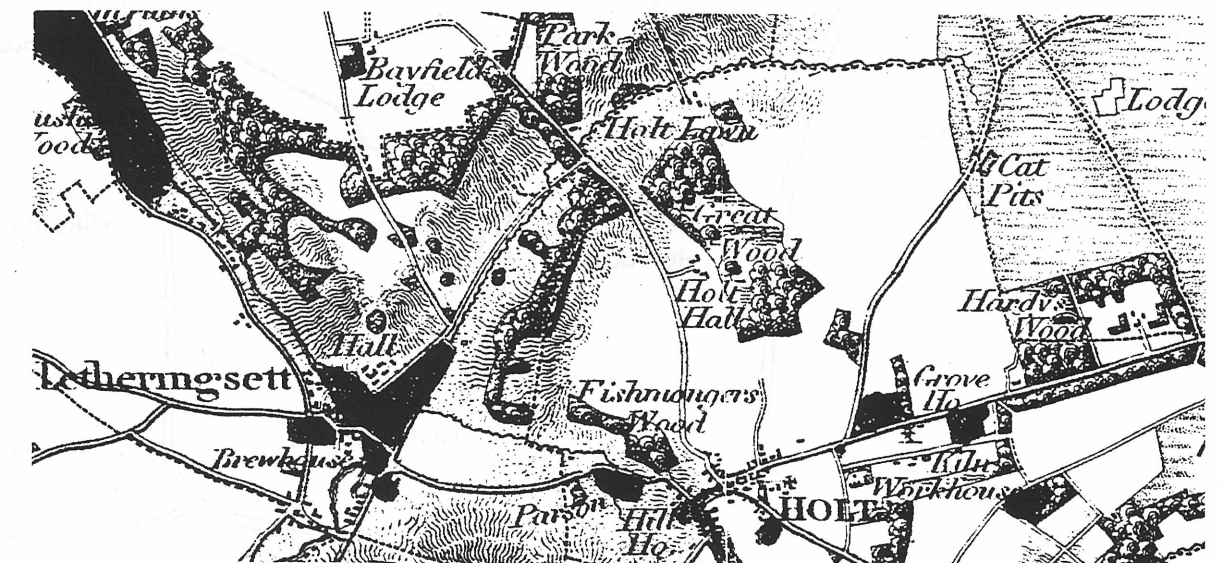
THE PARK AT HOLT HALL

By Monica White

This article describes the planting and development of the garden and parkland of Holt Hall, now Holt Hall School. The grounds were part of the manor of Holt, recorded in the Domesday Book as a Royal Manor held under the king. By the mid-thirteenth century there were two subsidiary manors: Holt Pereers to the north-west and Holt Hales to the south-east.

The presence of very ancient oak and sweet chestnut stools, reputed to be well over 900 years old, indicates that the flatter, central area of the grounds of the present school was coppiced woodland in 1086. The ground flora supports this suggestion. The surrounding river valley slopes may have been wood pasture, ie groups of pollarded oaks on heathland or grassland, at this time. Certainly the area was covered by wood pasture by the fifteenth century. Many of the ancient pollards remain and the shape of the woodland, its position in relation to parish boundaries, and the winding internal paths, all indicate a medieval wood. The remaining oak pollards are numerous and some are so close together that in summer, when the leaves are out, the canopies meet indicating that this was dense wood pasture. This is confirmed by the fact that the area is shown as woodland on Faden's map of 1794-97. More open wood pasture is shown as heath or grassland.

Enclosed within the wood, on the western edges, were two open glades or laundes, from which Lawn Farm probably derives its name, and a large pond, or small lake, fed by underground springs. A stream from the north of the lake ran down a narrow valley to join a tributary of the river Glaven. The house, Holt Hall, lay just within the western boundary of the wood close to the lake. It is marked on Faden's map showing that George Thomlinson, the owner, had subscribed towards the cost of the preparation and printing of the map. It is not known whether this was the original manor house, but it was, at least in part, medieval.

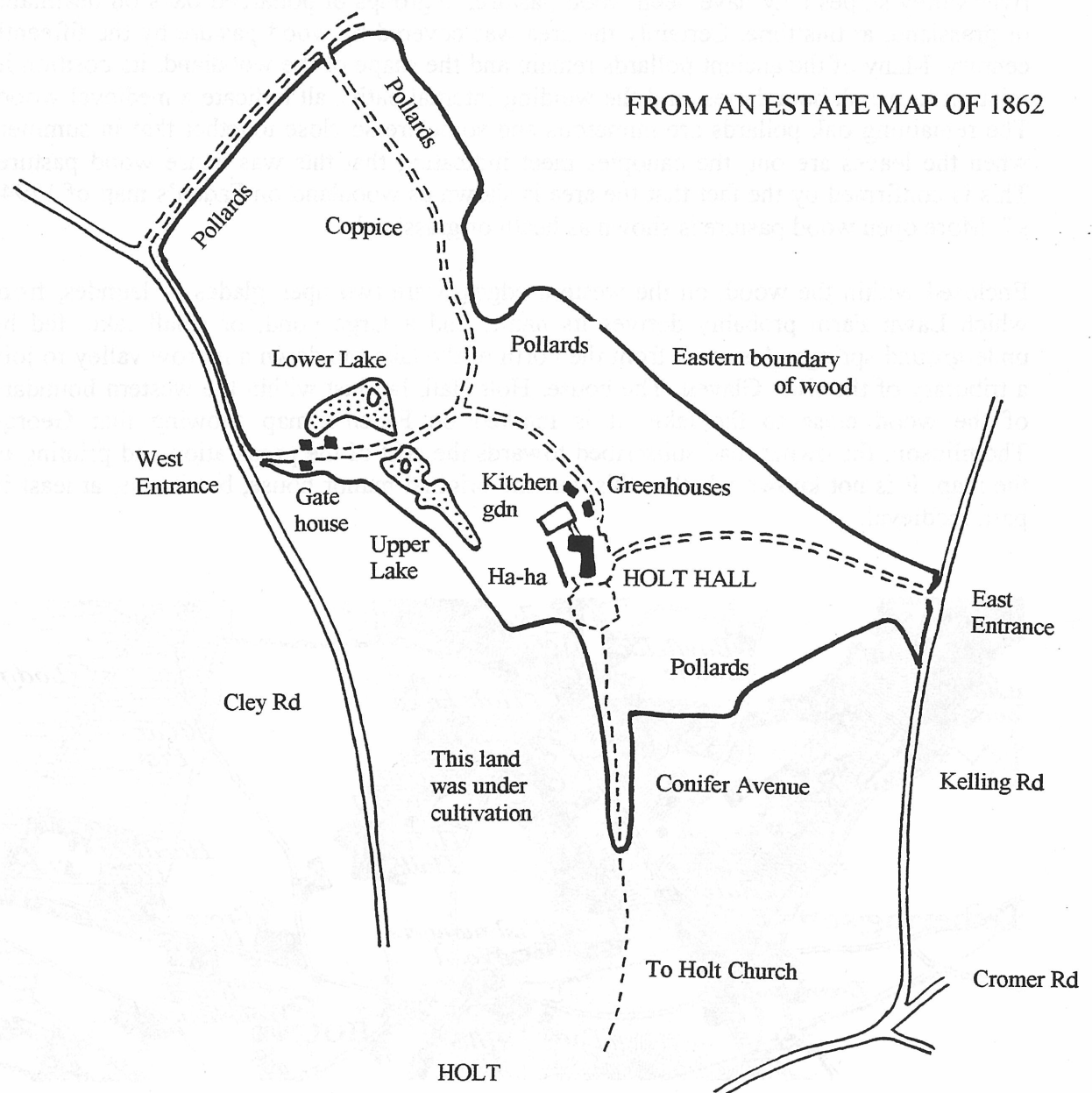


From Bryant's map of Norfolk 1826

The status of the Hall declined over the next 30 years, and the Tithe map of 1839 records the Hall as a tenanted farmhouse but, somewhere between 1839 and 1845, Walter Pemberton bought the estate. It seems probable that he was a member of the Pemberton family who owned land in the Holt area (the name is mentioned frequently in the Holt Enclosure documents), and he gradually converted the 110-120 acres, largely woodland, into an estate suitable for a landed gentleman and his family.

The medieval Hall was demolished and two estate cottages built, almost certainly on the foundations of the old Hall. Two gatehouses were constructed at the western entrance to the estate. All these buildings incorporated material from the demolished Hall.

Two new entrances were made. The eastern entrance, now the main one, ran through the woodland to a small eminence, also wooded. The second entrance, to the south, was rendered imposing by a great avenue of specimen conifers. Very few of these remain.



Conifers were fashionable in the mid-nineteenth century, and Walter Pemberton was probably influenced by Walter Withers and Cozens-Hardy, both of whom had planted conifers in the Glaven Valley. The drive from the west entrance was extended to serve the new Hall.

The eminence was flattened and a new house built, facing east and running north-south. In 1845 the house is described as 'a considerable mansion newly built in the Tudor style'. A leaflet produced in c.1972 describes the Hall as 'a dull Victorian building with brick facings'.

A paved terrace was constructed behind the house, on the western side, with a ballustraded wall, and 3 flights of steps, one to the north, one to the west and one to the south. This was planted with shrubs and flowerbeds, and contained an ornamental pond and fountain. The garden was bounded on the north side by a formal yew hedge with an arch cut into it leading into the kitchen garden. The western boundary was a sunken ha-ha giving views from the house and terrace of the lake.

On the south side a paved path ran through a belt of trees into a square grassy area, of almost half an acre, enclosed in trees. Some appear to be ancient pollarded oaks, the rest are more ornamental trees. Originally short-lived shrubs and small trees were planted to provide a pleasant aspect while the larger trees were maturing. The paved path ran around the edges of the area and led into the avenue through which one could gain views of Holt church. The avenue was known as Church Path, since it was used by the servants to walk to church on Sundays. Views of distant churches, glimpsed through avenues or clumps of trees, were valued features in mid-Victorian gardens.

The large kitchen garden was close to the house and slightly north-west of it. The northern and eastern boundaries were brick walls; the north wall being angled at its extremities to give better protection to the south-facing area. The remaining sides were bounded by formal yew hedges. It is not recorded whether the walls had gates, but it seems probable since two magnificent timber-framed glasshouses were built close to both the garden and the outbuildings.

The stream from the lake was dammed and two new ornamental lakes, each with an island, were constructed. There are other examples of lakes being made in a similar way in north Norfolk, eg on the area known as the Hangs, to the north-east of Holt Hall.

The parkland was improved by the judicious removal of pollarded oaks from the old wood pasture. A large open grassy area was cleared in the front of the house, and only a few old pollards were retained. Pollarding as a means of timber production was considered very old-fashioned by the mid-nineteenth century and had been superseded by plantations, but landowners in Norfolk often retained some of the old trees in their parkland. Perhaps their picturesque appearance was thought attractive. Some specimen trees were planted on the lawn and one, a magnificent oak, has survived.

Trees were removed from the north-east of the house to give glimpses, through the wooded pasture, of the distant hills, and also from the north-west to give views of the lake.

Paths were made through the remaining coppiced woodland and wood pasture (in total about 90 acres) to features of interest. These paths are probably improved woodland ways

since they follow the contours and appear to divide the coppiced wood into individual *coupes* (areas cut in rotation). One path, for example, led to the rustic bridge over the summerhouse at the northern edge of the lower lake with superb views down the dry valley to the wooded Pereers Hills on the distant slopes.

Finally, some of the wood pasture was interplanted with deciduous trees, mostly oak, beech and ash, and with some conifers. Then, in about 1860, the garden and parkland were opened to the public.

No sketchmap for the garden design survives, and the name of the landscape designer is not known. It is possible, indeed, that Walter Pemberton planned the garden himself. Gardening was an absorbing interest of many Victorian landowners. However, although extensive replanting took place in the mid-twentieth century and some trees planted in the 1850s were felled, it is still possible to recognise many features of the Victorian gardens.

Monica White is a botanist, and formerly lectured at University College, London.

Sources

Faden's map 1797

Bryant's map 1826

Holt Tithe Map 1839

Estate map 1865

Bill advertising the sale of the house 1865

Newspaper article, dated August 1862, source and precise date not given.

Leaflet on the history of the Hall, published c.1972.

Research by Anthea Taigal, in conjunction with UEA and English Heritage, on Norfolk Gardens; the section on Holt Gardens is held by the Local History Section.

Field work in the grounds of the School.