

THE HOWE

'No part of the garden is easier to make and to maintain, nor can be lovelier, than a well-designed and carefully planted glade of trees and shrubs.'

Percy Cane Garden Design of To-day 1934

Percy Cane (1881-1976) designed such a glade at The Howe, Halstead. The glade's downward slope, curving borders, specimen trees and shrubs, rock garden and fountains, was photographed in its prime and used to illustrate Cane's 1934 book *Garden Design of To-day*. Also illustrated in this book is Cane's design for the paved walk surrounding a rose garden at The Howe. The rose garden was set on higher ground adjacent to the house, and from there steps led down to the glade with its specimen trees, shrubs, and rockery to the pond at the bottom,

The Howe, Halstead, is situated in a scenic position above its parkland and overlooks the Colne Valley; it is an early nineteenth century Grade II listed building of grey gault brickwork. The house was rebuilt by Edward May when he bought the estate in the early nineteenth century: the 1838 tithe award gives Edward May as the owner of the Howe and surrounding arable, woods and pasture land together with 'the Mansion Pleasure Grounds' of over an acre and a 'Park' of twenty-five acres.

Financial circumstances forced Edward May to advertise for sale The Howe in 1843 and sales adverts describe the grounds as 'capital and substantial stabling, double coach-house, walled gardens, with spacious hot-house, heated with hot water, melon ground, superior and well-arranged farm buildings, beautiful pleasure grounds, admirably laid out, and richly dressed with clumps and belts of plantations, enclosed by expensive fences, and studded with fine timber, with handsome carriage drive, and extensive walks, terminated by a neat lodge.'

Edward Hornor bought The Howe Estate in 1845 following a brief period when the estate had been owned by Arthur Macnamara and William Gosset. Edward Hornor died at The Howe in 1868 but his wife, Anne, continued farming on The Howe Estate and lived to the age of 93 years, dying in 1914.

Samuel Augustine Courtauld bought The Howe in 1914 and extended the property. Pam Corder-Birch writes in her recent book on The Howe Estate (published by Pam Corder-Birch in 2012) that numerous gardeners were employed to work in The Howe gardens 'which were always immaculate. As well as the flowers, lawns, shrubs and vegetables there were huge glass houses filled with plants, ferns and various fruits, a very large 'walled in' garden, vines, a rhubarb house and an orchard to be maintained, along with woodland areas, meadows, ponds and a tennis court, as well as live stock to be cared for.'

It is uncertain as to the exact date of Percy Cane's involvement with the development of The Howe gardens, but it is thought to be one of his earlier commissions in the late 1920's or early 1930's. Percy Cane was a garden designer and writer and was born on 20 September 1881 at 116 High Street, Braintree. He spent his childhood in Braintree and in 1897 the family moved to Bocking Mill. From February 1903 to January 1908 Percy worked for Crittalls, the firm of window manufacturers. A visit to Easton Lodge, designed in 1902 by Harold Peto (1854-1933) for the Countess of Warwick, inspired Percy to become a garden designer. He left Crittalls and enrolled at Chelmsford College of Science and Art to study art and architecture.

Percy Cane began a career in journalism in 1915 by writing for *My Garden Illustrated*. Cane then studied at the Chelmsford County School of Horticulture in 1918 and by 1919 was established in London as a garden architect.

Following Samuel Augustine Courtauld's extensions to the house, Percy Cane was commissioned to design the glade, rockery, and rose garden. Cane's book *Garden Design of To-day* gives us a glimpse of how the rose garden and surroundings originally looked: one photo focuses on the paved walk surrounding the sunken rose garden.

Cane's garden was still intact in 1954 as the sales particulars describe the large sunken circular rose garden with flag stone paths, dwarf walls and a brick and tiled summer house. Other features described were the 'extensive undulating garden with rustic summer house, gravel paths and shady walks beautifully decorated with ornamental and other trees. Choice rhododendrons, laurels, bamboo and other grasses. Berberis and other shrubs, magnolias and Judas trees. Rockeries with fountains.'

The map included in the 1954 sales documents is a section of the 1923 ordnance survey map third edition and does not show the Percy Cane improvements, which probably were implemented later that decade. The 1923 map shows paths leading from the front and side of the house from where it meanders through the wooded area which was to become the glade to the pond at the bottom.

From 1914 to 1954 the Courtauld family owned the estate. Ralph van Asch purchased part of the estate from the Courtauld executors with a view to development. Parts of the estate were sold-off in parcels by a firm of estate developers and houses were built along Howe The Howe is approached by a long sweeping drive leading from Hedingham Road, but since the estate was partially sold off in the 1950's the drive is now shared by the development of three other properties. In 1957 the house and remaining grounds were purchased by the Darrell family and still remains the family home.

Interestingly, during Courtauld's ownership of The Howe, Pam Corder-Birch, in her book on The Howe Estate, lists Harold Ainsworth Peto (1854-1933) among the staff employed by Samuel and Edith Courtauld. Pam writes that 'Before The Howe was sold to the developers most of the statues and stone used by Peto in the garden was removed'. Local newspaper reports list Peto as a guest of the Courtaulds at weddings at The Howe and therefore this suggests that Peto was a friend of the Courtauld family. Apparently Peto was often asked to provide statues for gardens, which he sourced from Italy, and it is possible that he was commissioned to do this by Samuel Courtauld. More research on this is needed.

Unfortunately Percy Cane's garden improvements have suffered in recent years and the sunken rose garden is now a swimming pool. The original stone walls surrounding the rose garden remain in good condition and retain their octagonal shape. The swimming pool is edged with paving with a grass surround and at one end has steps leading up to the original summer house. The stone summer house has stood the test of time despite being overgrown with vegetation and its neglected appearance. The summer house looks down to the glade and the steps at the other end of the pool leading to the glade have been removed. The 1966 ordnance survey map clearly shows the octagonal walls of the rose garden as well as the steps leading to the glade and to the summerhouse.

Today the glade at first looks impenetrable, but it is possible to clamber through the overgrowth and chance upon the partly covered rocks that once formed the rockery. A large sycamore grows above one rock and remnants of the fountains are still to be seen. Specimen trees and shrubs struggle for space although the rhododendrons still make a good show. The glade leads down to the pool, an earlier feature in the landscape, and it is here that it is most overgrown. Reaching the pond, the view is quite magical with the autumn coloured foliage from acer trees floating on the surface; the large clump of lilies; and the surrounding specimen trees and shrubs. It is easy to visualise what a lovely area the glade must have been. The pond is also shaded by bankside willows, cherry laurels, hawthorn and oak.

The parkland is separated from garden by a ha-ha and has been designated a local wildlife site. In the absence of regular mowing much of the grassland has been lost to scrub with a dense area of bramble encroaching into the grassland. There are several large oaks, dead trees, large copper beech to the north end of the ha-ha and a sweet chestnut to the south.

The Howe has a large walled garden: this garden was described in the 1954 sales particulars as a 'large well maintained walled-in kitchen and flower garden with ornamental iron gates and having choice fruit trees on the walls and large glass house'. Today the walls and ornamental gates appear in good order but the kitchen and flower garden is covered in weeds and bramble although some fruit trees remain.

Percy Cane's clients were mostly wealthy aristocrats with large private gardens, and he became one of the most prominent designers from the 1930's to the 1950's. His commissions provided material for his books on garden design and from 1930-1939 was founder-editor of the quarterly journal, Garden Design. Cane was a regular exhibitor at the Chelsea Flower Show, achieving 8 gold and 3 silver-gilt medals. In 1963 Cane's work as a designer of gardens and a landscape architect resulted in him being awarded the Royal Horticultural Society's Veitch Memorial medal. Cane continued working until a severe stroke in 1972 resulted in him spending his final years in a nursing home. Percy Cane died on 23 February 1976.

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