



219. Oil painting entitled 'Haldon Hall near Exeter' by Francis Towne, 1780.

Haldon House

near Exeter

1780

Haldon was once one of the great houses of Devon and its landscape was filled with acres of woodland.

220. Drawing by Thomas Allom for a steel line engraving by W. Le Petit, 1831



were underground. All this ascent Sir Robert Palk removed, and laid open the offices; by which the house appears one story higher than before. The great front is eastward. Two geometrical staircases, one at the north, the other at the south end, were lately erected. The gardens on the south side of the house were removed to some little distance by Sir Robert and their place is now occupied by lawn, with suitable plantations. The improvements round the house are happily planned: and the rapid and vigorous growth of the many thousand trees, which have been recently planted, excites our surprise, from the high and open situations where they flourish. Sir Robert Palk has, by act of parliament, enclosed some hundreds of acres from Haldon, for the purposes of extending his plantations.¹²⁹

In 1898 it was said that the original building had 365 windows, one for each day of the year.¹³⁰ The main house was demolished in 1920. Part of the remainder now forms the Lord Haldon Hotel.

Inset: A flower piece, Benjamin Green, 1779.





222. Reverend Swete's new home as depicted in a watercolour by himself entitled 'East view of Oxton House', August 1789.



221. The old house at Oxton in 1781, as painted by Reverend Swete.



223. Oxton's stretch of water as painted by Swete, 1795.



224. Oxton as situated below Haldon Hills by John Swete, 1795.



225. The ruined entrance gate by John Swete, 1795



226. The quarry and entrance to the hermit's cave, 1795.

Oxton

near Kenn
1781

This series of watercolours demonstrate the leisure time the artist enjoyed after he changed his surname from Tripe to Swete in order to inherit a fortune from his childless aunt.

The wealth also allowed Reverend John Tripe to demolish his home, Oxton, and redesign the landscape. He estimated that he spent £6,000 in his endeavours. Swete was then nearly thirty years old. A few years later he married and the couple had twelve children, all but two of whom were



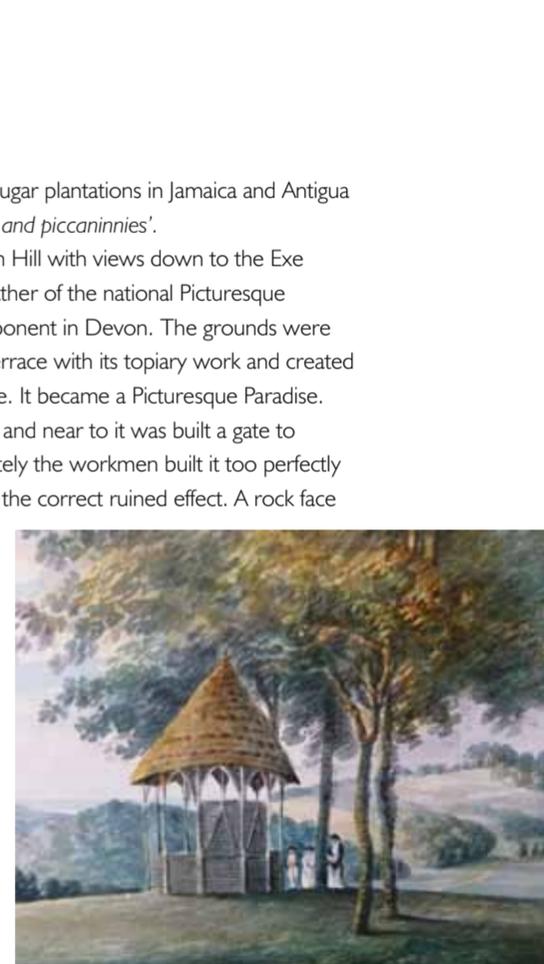
227. The summerhouse by John Swete, 1795.

girls. Swete's wealth partly came from sugar plantations in Jamaica and Antigua where he noted he had 'slaves, negroes and piccaninnies'.

Oxton is situated below Haldon Hill with views down to the Exe Estuary. Just as William Gilpin was the father of the national Picturesque Movement, Swete was its greatest proponent in Devon. The grounds were laid out in its terms. He removed the terrace with its topiary work and created a lawn with open views of the landscape. It became a Picturesque Paradise.

A lake was formed in the valley and near to it was built a gate to suggest an ancient structure. Unfortunately the workmen built it too perfectly and it had to be taken down to achieve the correct ruined effect. A rock face was cut to give the appearance of a quarry and a hermit's cave was carved out of its side. It had a bed of stone with a pillow of the same material. A summerhouse was built above Oxton and nearby was the Shed, a thatched structure in which to take in the views.

Swete was well-read and studied the work of not just Gilpin but Capability Brown and William Kent. He was all but forgotten by the generation following his death in 1821. Two generations later interest revived in his written work and watercolours.¹³¹ Oxton is now divided into multi-ownership.



228. The thatched 'Shed' by John Swete, 1795.

Inset: Study of Three Flowers, Johann Christian August Birnbaum, 1781.



229. Watercolour entitled 'Mamhead', by Miss F. L. Oglander, 1787.

Mamhead

1787

In 1785, two years before this view was painted, a Hampshire visitor recorded in his travel journal that Mamhead was a 'very noble place seeing so many fine views around it, rather a poor House'.¹³² By that date the prospects from it were impressive as was the landscape but the house had become unimpressive.

Inset: Fantastic hairdress with fruit and vegetable motifs, anon., eighteenth century.



Mamhead has one of the most remarkable recorded histories, and visual records, of a house and garden in Devon. It was recorded by the Normans, more than 900 years ago, in the Exeter Domesday Book. The name is a conglomeration of the words teat and head and refers to the shape of this prominent hill.¹³³

The Balle family were lords of the manor from the sixteenth century and it was Sir Peter Balle, a lawyer and Attorney General to Queen Henrietta Maria, who rebuilt it in the mid 1600s. He 'was allured by the beauties of the situation which he could not resist'. A later writer commented that his political ambitions were unsuccessful at the Restoration and thus he could not afford to develop the estate to the extent he had wished.¹³⁴

In the late 1600s his son Robert was resident in northern Italy as a merchant in the firm of Death & Skinner. He was described there as 'known to be a turbulent sort of man, that never speaks well of any one behind their backs, but fawns to their faces'.¹³⁵ Once he returned to England Balle became a Member of Parliament and set up home at Mamhead. He was one of 15 surviving children. Balle landscaped the grounds with the Italian plants he had become interested in. One Georgian writer commented that he 'fell into the old error of torturing nature and deforming the face of it, by raising gardens with terraces, and making ponds and fountains on the sides of hills'. The formal gardens were accompanied by extensive plantations.¹³⁶ This was presumably the terrace described in 1750 as rising behind the house up along the hill.¹³⁷

His nephew Thomas, also a member of Parliament, built the stone obelisk which stands at some one hundred feet and continued to embellish 'the boldly-swelling grounds at Mamhead with



230 The earlier house at Mamhead as depicted by William Glynn in his watercolour entitled 'Mamhead', 1810.



231. Drawing of the south face of the house by Anthony Salvin, c.1832.



232. Drawing of the stables by Anthony Salvin, c.1832.

plantations; and is said to have brought, for this purpose from the Continent, a great quantity of cork, wainscot, oak, Spanish chestnut, acacia, cedar, and other exotic trees'. At some point it appears to have been known as 'Balle's Folly, so strong was the opinion, that trees would not bear such exposure' but these plantations have defined the grounds.¹³⁸ Another Georgian writer credited the Balle family with planting the first acorns of the *Quercus ilex* in England¹³⁹ while the writer of an early eighteenth-century gardening book attributed Thomas Balle, a 'curious and learned gentleman', with great knowledge in transplanting 'forest trees'.¹⁴⁰ Balle employed William Lucombe, the founder of the nursery which was at St Thomas near Exeter.¹⁴¹

Thomas Balle was the last of his family to live at Mamhead and was noted by one visitor as a 'humourist'. He described him in unflattering terms as a 'mule of such a stubborn temper that he does no one thing that any person would or would have him do'. Mamhead was grudgingly described as a good house but it was claimed that the rooms were filled with broken furniture and the floors were 'strewn with turds of dogs'.¹⁴²

Mamhead was subsequently purchased by Sir Robert Newman, yet another member of Parliament, who rebuilt the house on a new site and redesigned the gardens. Anthony Salvin, then twenty-six, was chosen in 1826 as the architect.¹⁴³ The new building received

enthusiastic praise for its Tudor style. One writer thought that it embraced 'almost all the beautiful peculiarities remarkable in the domestic architecture of that period'. He went on to describe:

'the whole exterior of the mansion, nearly eight hundred feet in circumference, is of Bath stone, very skilfully wrought, the tall chimney stacks and gables, highly ornamented, present a variety of different forms in succession, which are relieved by two square and two octagonal towers rising with extremely good effect. There are four fronts to this edifice, uniform in general design but considerably varied in detail, a mode of construction hitherto un-attempted by modern architects, but much practiced in the earlier periods. The whole building being raised on a broad terrace, gives it all the dignity required in a mansion of importance'.



233. Undated graphite, watercolour and ink entitled 'View of Mamhead, Devonshire' attributed to John Preston Neale, c.1832.

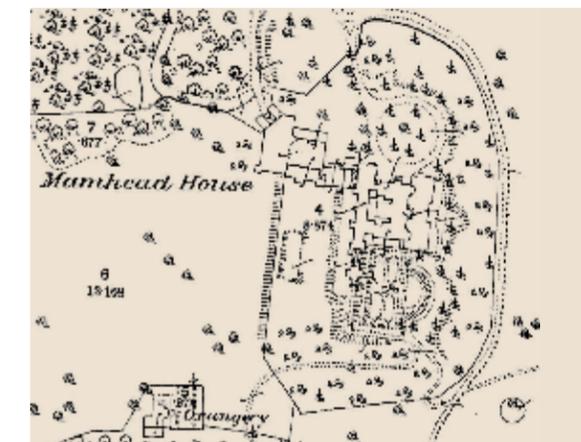
He added that along the southern front was a flower garden and an elegant conservatory stood at the end of the building.¹⁴⁴ A generation later, in 1858, a visitor was overwhelmed by the grandeur of a single bed in the terrace. It stood between 50 and 60 feet in diameter, was raised slightly in the centre, and was planted only with scarlet geraniums.¹⁴⁵

The first census taken after Mamhead was rebuilt, in 1841, listed Newman's household as standing at 25 persons. Sixteen of them were servants. John Claudius Loudon visited the following year and made a curious comment on the interior of Mamhead. He described it as being in general admirable but thought the representations of plants in the ceiling, although accurate and beautiful in itself, were in bad taste.¹⁴⁶ Loudon was more enthusiastic about what had been achieved in the grounds. He wrote:



234. Pencil and ink sketch by Henrietta Matilda Crompton inscribed 'View from the library window at Mamhead of Exmouth the woods of Powderham. Sir Robert Newman built a beautiful house on the splendid property belonging to Lord Lisbourne. Mr Salvin the Architect. Poured with rain', 1840.

235. Detail from Ordnance Survey map of Mamhead, 1890.



'The conservatory at Mamhead is much too small for the situation; but, considering the house as a villa, it is, perhaps, not altogether out of proportion. Part of the roof is opaque, which we were surprised at; because that part is completely concealed by the parapet, and the light would have been of essential importance to the plants. There are upper and lower terraces; but the latter is not, in our opinion, sufficiently separated from the park by architectural parapets and other forms to justify the introduction of flowers on it. The fortification-like character is also, we think, too conspicuous in some parts, and the lines of slope and surface of glacis are, in others, disproportionately large for the height of the house. There is a flower-garden in a sunk panel, very judiciously designed and laid out; but it is planted with shrubs and other articles growing to the height of 3 or 4 feet, which prevent the shapes of the beds from being seen in a birds-eye view, so as to form a whole. Instead of this, the beds should have been planted with articles which do not rise above the height of 6 or 8 inches; or with roses having their shoots pegged down on green moss, so as not much to exceed that

*height. As an appendage to such a house, this garden ought to have been in much higher keeping; but perfect high keeping, in Devonshire we have only seen at Luscombe and at Endsleigh. The terrace walks at Mamhead are not yet united with the pleasure-ground, which, indeed, remains to be formed; and a finer situation for forming a pleasure-ground walk very rarely occurs. We took the dimensions of two or three immense Lucombe oaks and cork trees, which we need not here repeat, because they are much the same as those given of the same trees in our Arboretum as measured in 1837. The dimensions now taken were, for want of time, not made with sufficient accuracy to be useful in showing the increase of the trees since that period. The kitchen-garden is at a distance from the house, very unfavourably situated in a hollow; but, notwithstanding this, we have seldom seen walls more beautifully covered with fruit trees, especially with peaches and nectarines; the borders are not cropped.'*¹⁴⁷

The grounds at Mamhead remain in part, nine centuries after being recorded. The house and grounds are in private ownership.



236. Watercolour entitled 'From the Belvedere at Powderham' by Miss F. L. Oglander, 1787.



237. Painting by unknown artist, c. 1850, of the Powderham Belvedere.

The Belvederes

1787

Devon has two belvederes, each triangular, which were built fifteen years and only six miles apart. Each was constructed as ornaments for large estates and both have served as local landmarks for more than two hundred years.

That at Powderham was built in the early 1770s by William, second Viscount Courtenay. In 1793 Reverend Polwhele wrote approvingly of it. He noted: *'To enjoy a full and uninterrupted view of this beautiful scene, and of the diversified country around it, some building was necessary to be erected on one of the most commanding heights. And the late Lord Courtenay, whose taste deserves every commendation, made choice of a hill that is, indeed, happily calculated to answer this purpose. Here, under his inspection, the Belvedere was built; the form of which is triangular, with a hexagonal tower at each corner. From Lawrence-castle at Haldon, and from the obelisk at Mamhead, we have a greater extent of prospect: but, for a command of objects, the Belvedere is, perhaps, the first spot in the western counties. The views from the Belvedere are a complete garden - its parts discriminated with the most brilliant distinctness, yet flowing into one beautiful whole.'*

Polwhele was so enamoured of the Belvedere that he wrote at length about the views from each of the three windows.¹⁴⁸ In about 1800 the author of *A guide in a tour to the watering places, and their environs, on the south-east coast of Devon* was equally fulsome when he noted that it commanded *'a prospect of the lovely interchange of wooded heights and descending vales.'*¹⁴⁹

Its companion, Haldon Belvedere, also known as Lawrence Tower, was built in 1788 by Sir Robert Palk near his country seat of Haldon. Its purpose was to further the memory of Major General Stringer Lawrence and a statue of him survives in the tower. This three-sided tower was constructed after that erected at Powderham Castle. Whilst the former has been rescued and restored, the latter was gutted by several fires in the twentieth century.

The Powderham Belvedere remains in private ownership and the Haldon Belvedere is owned by the Devon Historic Buildings Trust.



239. Pen and wash by Mary Luxmoore entitled 'View from the Belvedere at Powderham', c. 1830.



238. Lithograph by L. W. Martens entitled 'Belvedere at Powderham Park', 10 September 1829.



Inset: *Flowers by a Stone Vase*, Peter Faes, 1786.



240. Watercolour by Swete entitled 'West Teignmouth' which shows Bitton to the left, no date given. Swete visited Bitton in 1795 and noted then that the house, which belonged to Mackworth Praed, was a 'most agreeable spot' and was highly picturesque. He regarded it as so closely positioned near the Teign River that it required a wall to prevent flooding. Swete recorded no details of the gardens.⁷

John Swete's Picturesque Sketches of Devon

Bitton, Buckland Filleigh, Cleave, Dawlish, Escot and Exminster
1789–1800

In 1789 Reverend John Swete began touring Devon in search of the Picturesque. He recorded his thoughts in twenty volumes which he illustrated with his own watercolours.

Each of these, except some which were destroyed during bombing at Newton Abbot in the second world war, were given to the Devon Heritage Centre. Swete finished his tours, which brought him to every corner of the county, in 1800. Amongst the details which he noted were descriptions of the grounds of large country houses. Of some he wrote very little about the gardens.

Swete was visited by Joseph Farington, the diarist, twenty years after his Picturesque tours were finished. Bishop Fisher had recommended Swete to Farington as an authority on the Picturesque. Swete showed him one of the volumes and Farington was impressed with what he saw and how he was treated ('his appearance was prepossessing, being handsome, and his address agreeable'). Mary Anne Burgess visited him at Oxton, nearly twenty years earlier in 1792, and wrote to a friend 'I saw them all and I need not add I was very highly gratified. I like his style very much indeed.'¹⁵⁰

The Tour of Doctor Syntax, in search of the picturesque was published in the early 1800s as a satire on travelling vicars such as Swete who sought the picturesque scenery of England.¹⁵¹



241. Watercolour entitled 'Buckland Filleigh', no date given. Swete visited in 1796 and was taken through the adjoining woodlands by the Fortescue family, the owners, who showed him three pleasure buildings. These he described as being rustic temples with seats inside. The three buildings were made in the same style and were composed of 'trunks, limbs and roots of trees'.⁸

Inset: Dr Syntax sketching the lake, Thomas Rowlandson, 1812.

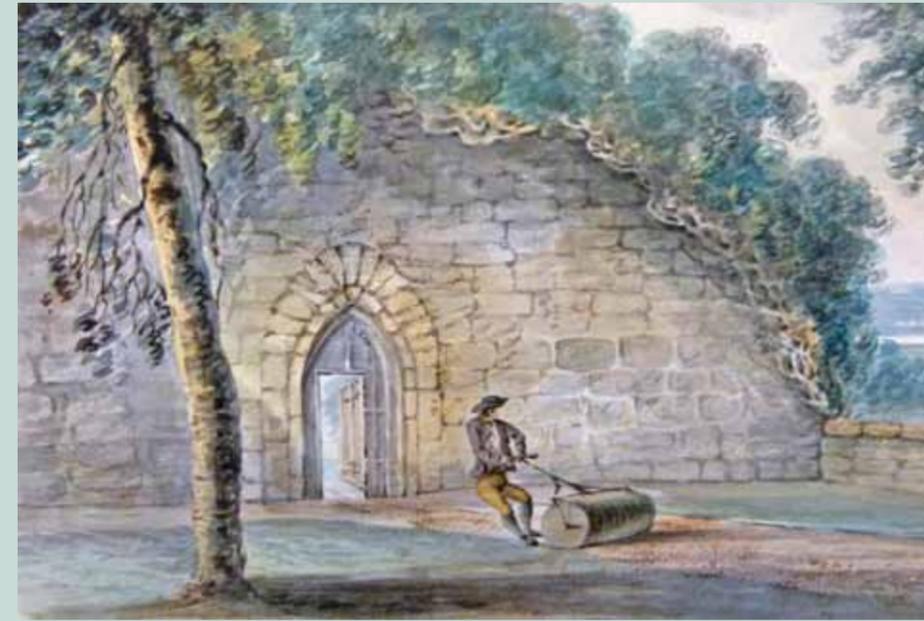
242. Watercolour entitled 'Cleve, seat of Thomas Northmore, esquire', 1796. Swete criticized the grounds of Cleave, near Exeter, for not being picturesque enough. He felt the gardens and outbuildings should be hidden from view, the lawn smoothed and the entrance changed from a straight line to a winding one. Swete did however approve of the view of Exeter from beyond the shrubbery.⁹



243. Watercolour entitled 'Escot', December 1794. Swete approached the house between an avenue of ancient oaks and then came to the pool of water of which he disapproved. Its oval shape was too formal for Swete. In his opinion Capability Brown would have altered the dams and expanded the extent of the pond. Swete recounted that a yacht had been kept on the pond and that at the start and end of the working day shots were fired from cannon on board. He also paid attention to the two marquees set upon the lawn and noted that Sir George Yonge, whose family had built Escot in 1685, had advertised his house for sale. Swete wrote that Escot was purchased shortly afterwards by the Kennaways.¹⁰



244. Watercolour entitled 'Gateway of the vicar's house at Exminster', 3 November 1794. Swete approved of the ruins which he noted were older than the vicarage. He described the house as surrounded by shrubs amongst which were exceptional Arbutus. Swete's greatest praise was for the ruins and included in his watercolour is a gardener with a roller.¹¹



245. Watercolour entitled 'Cottage of Lardner', 3 November 1794. Swete wrote that as he was leaving Exminster his attention was arrested for a few minutes by the 'singular simplicity and added elegance' of a thatched cottage which belonged to Mr Lardner. He criticized the size of the upper windows and of the two wings but approved of the overall design. Swete noted that the grounds comprised of a field in front of the house with the sides lined with shrubs.¹²