

# THE HOUSE AND GARDENS OF COMBS HALL, NEAR STOWMARKET: A SURVEY BY THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND

by EDWARD MARTIN<sup>1</sup> and ALASTAIR OSWALD<sup>2</sup>

IN MARCH 1994 the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (R.C.H.M.E.) surveyed the earthwork remains of the gardens of Combs Hall at the request of the Archaeology Section of Suffolk County Council. The remains lie adjacent to the Church of St Mary at Combs, near Stowmarket, in central Suffolk (NGR TM 0511 5684). Combs Hall was a building of considerable architectural grandeur, built in 1724 for Orlando Bridgeman Esq. and demolished in 1756. While the few surviving outbuildings permitted only limited architectural analysis by R.C.H.M.E., the earthworks of the contemporary garden are extensive and well-preserved. The main earthworks were surveyed by the Ordnance Survey in 1884 and are shown on the first edition 1:2500 scale map of 1885 (and on subsequent editions). The first reference in print to the remains was in 1919, following a visit by the Revd Edmund Farrer of Botesdale, a very observant local antiquarian who made notes on a large number of historic houses and sites in the county. However the detailed interpretation of the earthworks only started after an estate map of 1741 was brought into the Suffolk Record Office in 1991 (Jones 1991). The gardens, with their formal design, are in most respects characteristic of the early 18th century, but are of considerable interest in that they are tightly dated, were recorded in detail on a contemporary estate map, and were almost immediately fossilised by the abandonment of the house.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the Middle Ages the manor of Combs belonged to a succession of knightly and noble families (Copinger 1910, 149–55), including the Uffords, Earls of Suffolk (whose arms can still be seen on the church tower). However, none of these families seems to have actually lived at Combs, though from 1500 to 1524 Robert Willoughby, the younger son of one of the manorial lords, was Rector of Combs and may conceivably have occupied the manor house beside the church. However for most of the 16th century Combs Hall was occupied by various tenants: George Everton gent., the 'servant' of Sir Thomas Gresham (the owner) was the lessee in 1579 (Smith and Baker 1982/3, 93 and 115); and Henry Lambe gent., the younger son of a gentry family seated at Trimley St Mary (Corder 1981, 204) was the tenant at the time of a manorial survey in 1581.<sup>3</sup> In 1594 the manor was bought by Thomas Dandy gent. of Bury St Edmunds<sup>4</sup> and although he and other members of his family were subsequently styled 'of Combs', they seem in fact to have lived elsewhere (Steer 1957). By 1636 the tenant was Edward Clough.<sup>5</sup> 'Mr Clowe' was still there in 1674, when he was taxed on six hearths (Hervey 1905, 79), despite the sale of the manor in 1667 by Thomas Dandy to Sir Edward Gage of Hengrave.<sup>6</sup> In 1687 Gage sold the manor on to William Bridgeman Esq. of Westminster.<sup>7</sup>

Bridgeman was the son of the Amsterdam agent of the East India Company, who rose, through the influence of his uncle Sir Orlando Bridgeman, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, to be Under-Secretary of State and Clerk of the Privy Council (Henning 1983). Despite his purchase of Combs, Bridgeman seems to have lived mainly at his house in Pall Mall. His wife, Diana Vernatti, belonged to a Dutch family of Italian origin (Q.F.V.F. 1870).

On his death in 1699, Bridgeman was succeeded by his only son, Orlando, then aged 19. Orlando was considerably less successful as a politician than his father. In 1709 he was removed from the commission of the peace for taking part in a noisy protest against the Whig mayor of

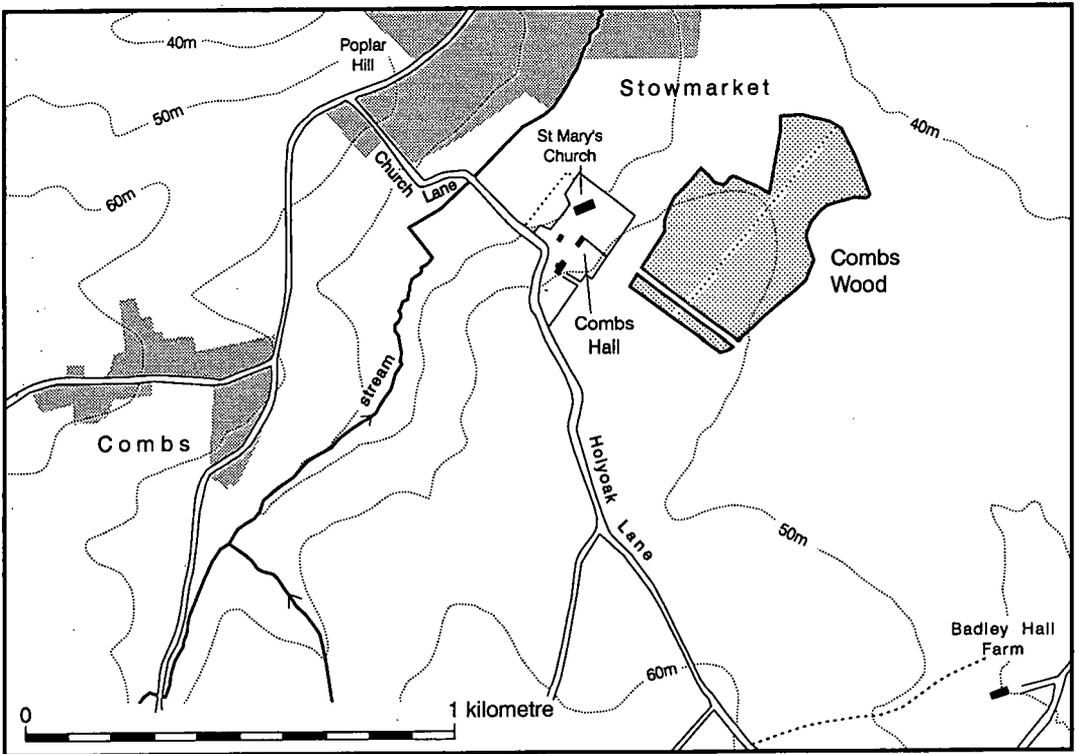
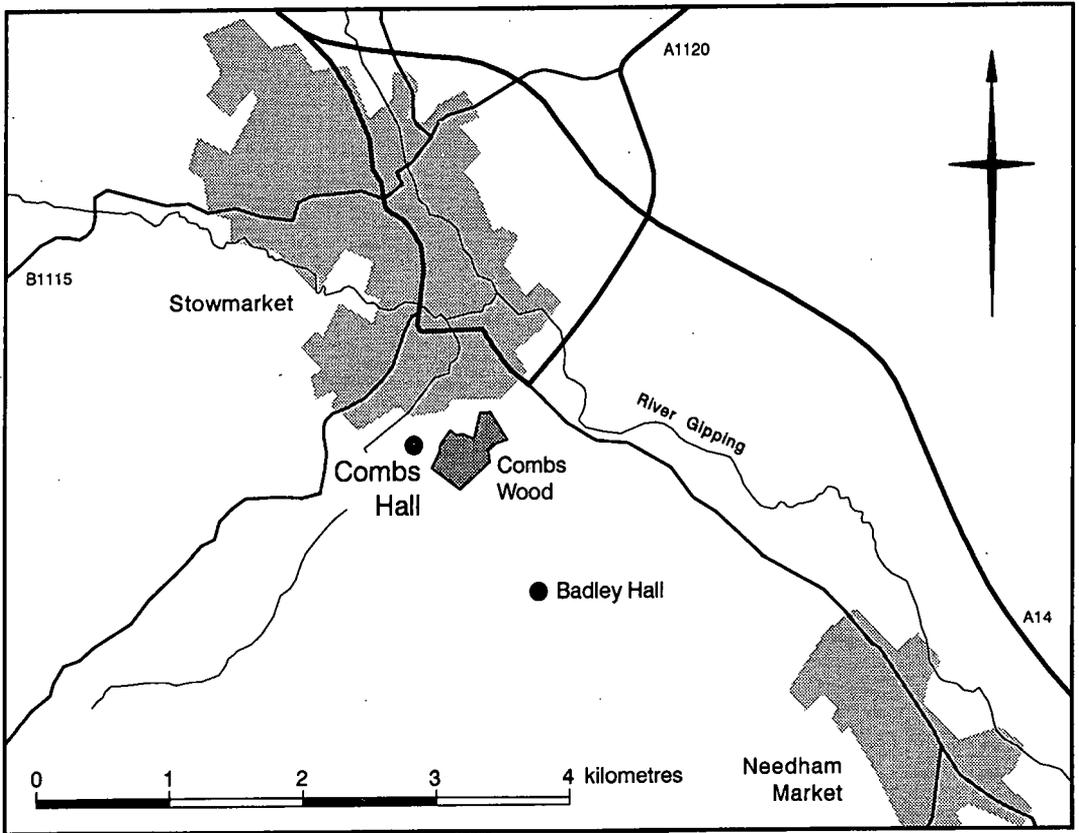


FIG. 90 – Location of Combs Hall.

Ipswich, but was restored in 1710. In 1710 he came bottom of the poll when he contested the Ipswich parliamentary seat as a Tory; he eventually gained the seat in 1714–15, but only after petitioning, having again come bottom of the poll. Perhaps understandably, he did not stand for parliament again (Hayton forthcoming). An insight into the character of the man is provided by his will (undated but probably written shortly before his death) which contains an extraordinary diatribe against ‘the fashionable opinions of Deism and as it is called free thinking’, and is followed by a lengthy affirmation of his membership of ‘the Orthodox Church of England’.<sup>8</sup> By 1706 Orlando had married his first wife – she was called Catherine, but her surname is unknown (confusingly, Orlando’s only sister, Katherine, married her cousin, another Orlando Bridgeman). Catherine died in 1711 having had three children, of whom only a son, William, survived. Orlando’s second wife, whom he married in 1716, was Alice, the daughter of William Shawe of Ipswich and the widow of Mileson Edgar Esq. of the Red House, Ipswich (d. 1713).

The first sign of Orlando’s interest in his Combs estate comes in 1710, when he commissioned a local surveyor, William Tallemach (probably one of the individuals of that name who lived nearby in Coddendam), to produce a map of the property<sup>9</sup> (Pl. LIV). This appears to show a timber-framed house with two wings of unequal size and height in a rectangular plot (labelled ‘House and yards’) to the south-west of the church. Another rectangular plot to the south-east is labelled ‘The Garden’ and was flanked on one side by the ‘Barnyards’ and an unspecified ‘The Yard’ on the other. A semi-bird’s-eye vignette (Pl. LV) at the top of the map shows a view of the house from the north-west, with the initials ‘O.B.’ in one corner, perhaps indicating that it was added to the map by Bridgeman himself. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that no vignettes occur on fourteen other maps by Tallemach.<sup>10</sup> Also the grey wash used to shade the vignette was not used elsewhere on the map.

The house and the garden portrayed in this vignette differ significantly from the depiction on the map, as will be discussed more fully below. In 1724 Bridgeman built a new brick house on a much grander scale, apparently a short distance to the south-east of the earlier house. At about the same time he laid out an extensive garden on either side of the house. The architect of the house is unknown, but it is possible that Orlando himself had a hand in the design. As already noted, he may have executed the vignette on the 1710 map and he may also have been the ‘Orlando Bridgeman Esq.’ who was a subscriber to James Gibbs’s *A Book of Architecture*, published in 1728. (Gibbs did in fact design the tomb of Orlando’s cousin, Sir John Bridgeman, 2nd Bt, who died in 1710).

Orlando Bridgeman died in April 1731, aged 51, at ‘the Lodgings in Leicesterfields’. In his will he left the house at Combs to his wife for life, expressing the wish that ‘providence had placed it in my power . . . to leave her wordly treasure’. Alice Bridgeman only survived her husband by a few months and died in December 1731. The whole estate then passed to Orlando’s only son, William, who was then a student at Christ’s, Cambridge. Orlando’s will hints at financial problems and William certainly had them, for in January 1733 he had to mortgage his whole inheritance.<sup>11</sup> By 1735 it was reported that the Hall that Orlando had ‘new built . . . in a beautiful Manner’ had been sold to Madam Crowley (Kirby 1735, 154). William Bridgeman did not long survive the sale, for he died in Paris in 1737.

The new owner, Mrs Theodosia Crowley, was the widow of John Crowley Esq. of Greenwich in Kent, ‘a very great merchant in many sorts of goods and merchandizes, chiefly in making and vending iron wares and having many forges, mills and warehouses in several counties’ (Redstone 1939, 190). Her husband’s family had amassed great wealth as manufacturers of iron – her father-in-law, Sir Ambrose Crowley, was the model for Addison’s ‘Sir John Anvil’ in the *Spectator* (no. 299). She also had independent wealth, as she had inherited Barking Hall in Suffolk from her brother, Theobald Gascoigne, in 1714. The Crowleys lived mainly in Greenwich and London, but maintained Barking Hall as their Suffolk base. The family initially extended their Suffolk estate by purchasing various small parcels of land – at Hitcham in 1723, and at Barking in 1726 and 1734 – but in 1735 they made three major purchases: Combs Hall, Badley Hall and

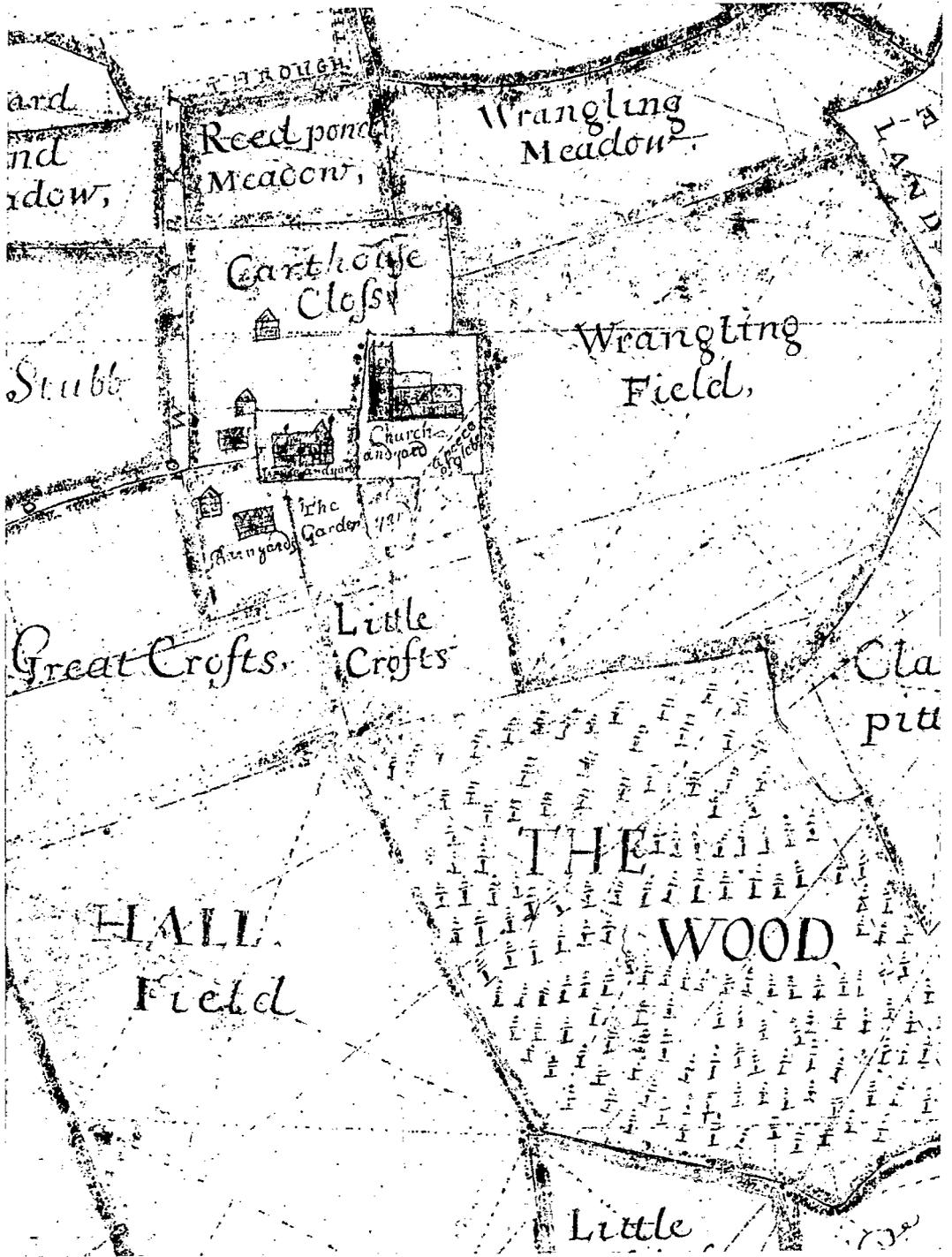


PLATE LIV – Part of a map of Combs made for Orlando Bridgeman by William Tallemach, 1710  
(S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/1/22).

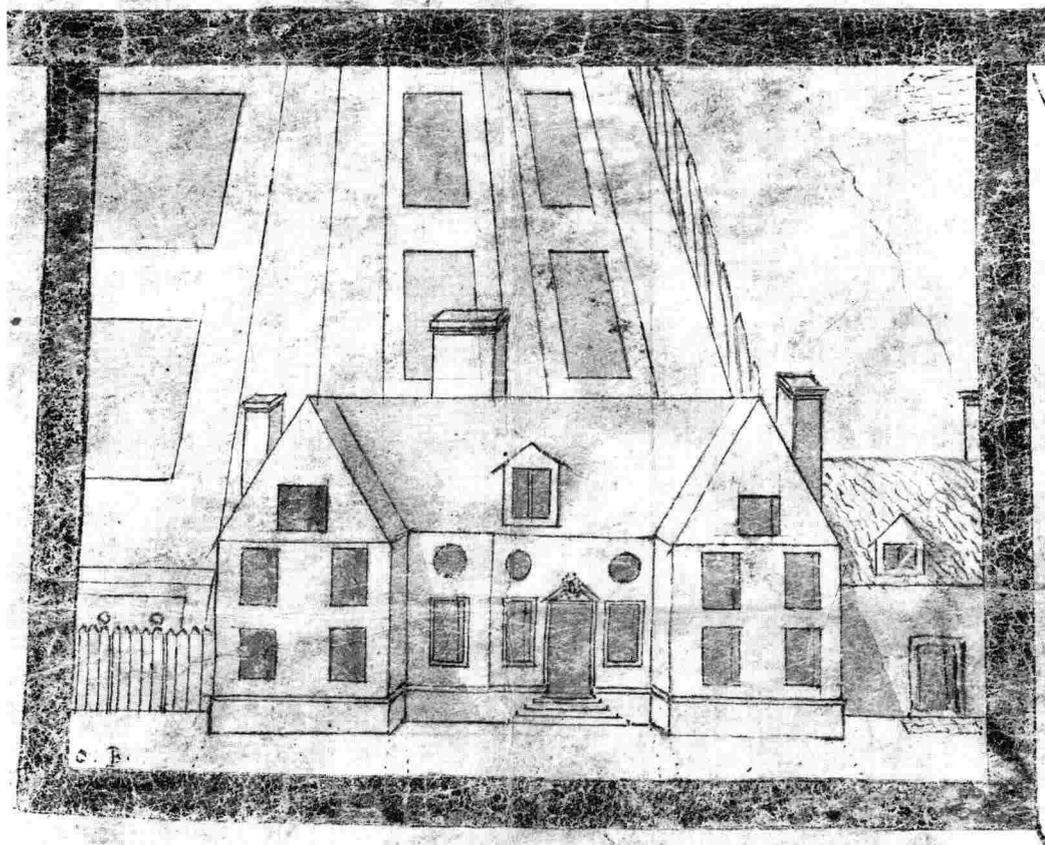


PLATE LV – Vignette of Combs Hall, signed ‘O.B.’, at the head of William Tallmach’s map of 1710  
(*S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/1/22*).

Columbyne Hall, Stowupland. Although Theodosia Crowley lived until 1782, the ownership of the Suffolk estates seems to have passed to her eldest son, Ambrose, who died in 1754 aged thirty-six, then to her son John, who died a year later aged thirty-five, and then jointly to the husbands of her two surviving daughters, the Earl of Ashburnham and Charles Boone Esq. of Lee in Kent.

In 1741 Ambrose Crowley had his entire Suffolk estate surveyed by William Collier of Eton (Eden 1975, 67) at a scale of two chains to an inch<sup>12</sup> (Pl. LVI). This map depicts the garden created by Bridgeman in some detail and includes a fine elevation drawing of the north-west front of Combs Hall (Pl. LVII). The house at Combs was clearly superfluous to the needs of the family and there is no evidence that the Crowleys ever occupied it. Following the death of John Crowley in 1755, there seems to have been a major rationalisation of the Suffolk estates. Most of Combs Hall was demolished (only a small service range at the rear was left) and the materials were advertised for sale ‘very cheap’ in the *Ipswich Journal* in 1756;<sup>13</sup> a large part of Badley Hall (a Tudor courtyard-plan house) was also demolished, the materials being advertised for sale in the *Ipswich Journal* on 2 March 1759; and the farmhouse on the Hitcham land was also demolished between 1741 and 1772. In 1772 the Suffolk estates were again surveyed, this time by Joseph Pennington (1750–1833), the agent of the Ashburnham estates. Pennington’s map of Combs<sup>14</sup> shows the Hall as being reduced to a T-shaped building; the garden is shown in less detail than on the 1741 map, but appears to have been largely intact, though divided between two tenants.





PLATE LVII – Elevation drawing of Combs Hall on William Collier's map of 1741 (*S.R.O.I., P 638*).

## DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

(Letters and names in bold type are also indicated on Fig. 91.)

*The Buildings*

The standing buildings associated with Combs Hall were examined briefly by the R.C.H.M.E.; the vignette on the 1710 map and the frontal elevation on the 1741 map also allow some analysis of the demolished buildings. Orlando Bridgeman's brick house of 1724 and its predecessors were located half-way up the side of a north-west-facing valley, immediately adjacent to the medieval parish church of **St Mary's**. The influence of the church in the design of the later layouts is evident from the 1741 elevation, where the church is used deliberately to frame the view of the house frontage.

A survey of the manor in 1581<sup>15</sup> describes the manor house as consisting of a hall (*aula*), a chamber (*conclave*) and divers rooms (*camerae*) under one roof, together with a barn (*horreo*), two stables, other agricultural buildings and a garden. This conventional description only shows that the house had the main rooms that could be expected in a manor house of that time. The six hearths recorded at the Hall in 1674 indicate a reasonably substantial house, but certainly not a 'great house'.

The 1710 vignette (Pl. LIV) shows a fairly modest house consisting of a main range with two symmetrical cross-wings, all of the same height. Despite the superficial regularity of the frontage and a classical pediment over the front door, the off-centre position of that door suggests that the house, originally at least, had the conventional late-medieval cross-passage plan, with the hall to the left of the door and a parlour in the wing beyond. A house of this type in mid Suffolk is likely to have been timber-framed, though a prominent plinth line across the whole front suggests that the building may later have been brick-faced. Curiously, the front door is shown as being above the plinth line, implying a raised floor in the main range. The upper storey of this range is also unusual in that it is shown as having small round windows, in contrast to the larger rectangular windows in the two wings. Perhaps this was a result of the raising of the ground floor, which constricted the wall area of the upper floor. Alternatively, the flooring-in of an original open hall may have produced a similar imbalance between the wall areas of the two storeys. Adjoining the right side of the house, but slightly recessed, the artist has drawn part of a single-storey range with a single door, but no windows except for a dormer in the roof. This roof is depicted as being thatched, in contrast to the sharp, presumably tiled, outline of the main house roof. The overall impression is of an earlier house which was remodelled in the late 17th century, which would fit with William Bridgeman's acquisition of the property in 1687.

The vignette does not, however, accord very well with Tallemach's sketch of the house on the map itself, even after allowances are made for the fact that he drew the south-east rather than the north-west front. Tallemach shows a timber-framed house with two wings of unequal size and height, and the single-storey wing shown on the vignette is absent. Although on his other maps (all later) Tallemach does seem to have resorted to using symbolic shapes for houses, the drawing on the Combs map, though undoubtedly crude and schematic, does appear to represent an actual building rather than just a symbol. It is possible that the rear of the house was unmodernised and therefore offered a contrasting appearance to the updated front. Alternatively, the house may actually have been in the process of modernisation in 1710, with the map showing the previous state and the vignette the finished result. It is certainly difficult to believe in the vignette as a design for a completely new house in view of the asymmetrical placing of the front door.

There are also problems with the relationship of the house to the rear garden, as indicated on the map and in the vignette. Tallemach clearly regularised the shapes of the land parcels (as is not uncommon on maps of this date) and altered the alignment of the church slightly so that it appeared upright at the centre of his map. What is debatable, however, is whether he marked the Hall in its correct position – though a rapid cross-check using Tallemach's other maps and

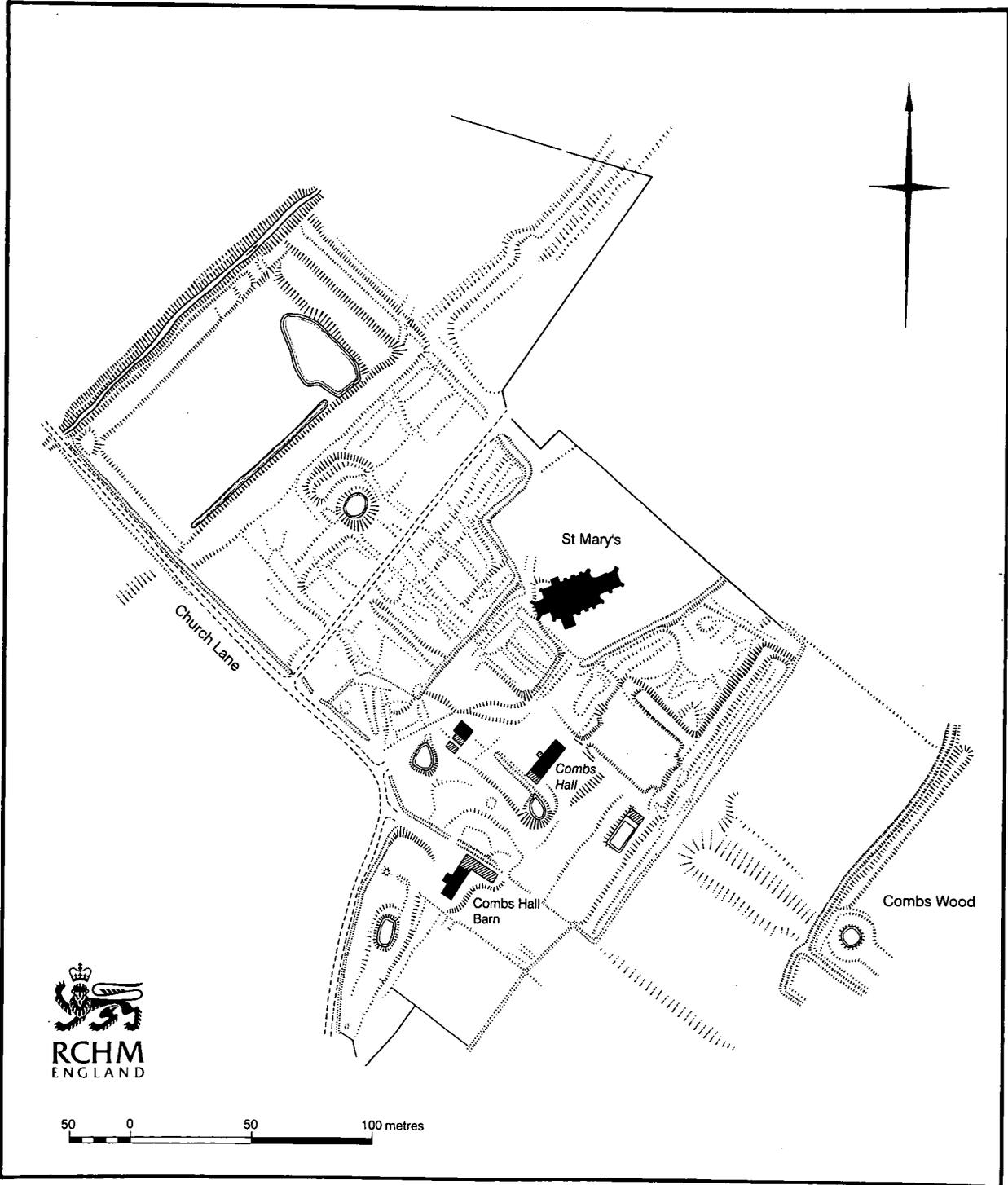


FIG. 91 – Plan of the earthworks and surviving buildings (R.C.H.M.E. copyright).

modern maps suggests that, within the general accuracy of his maps, Tallemach usually did site buildings correctly. The vignette, however, seems to imply that the garden led off directly from the rear of the house and was aligned on the centre of the house; but the map suggests that the house and garden were separated by a gap of about 20m and that the two were not so closely aligned. Part of the problem is that it is difficult to judge the size of the garden shown on the vignette, especially as only a section of it is depicted. Was it all contained within the parcel labelled 'The Garden' on the map, or did it extend into the 'Yard' to the east? If Tallemach's siting of the house is accepted at face value and if the beds shown on the left of the vignette were simply two squares, it is possible to believe that the layout could be accommodated within 'The Garden'. But if the house was in fact sited further to the south-east, where the later house stood, the garden is likely to have been more extensive than Tallemach indicated. The solution to these problems may be to suggest, yet again, that the vignette depicts work that was taking place at the time the map was being created. This would mean that the rear garden represents the first stage in Orlando's developing plan for the garden.

The 1756 advertisements in the *Ipswich Journal* give the date of 1724 for the building of Orlando Bridgeman's new **Combs Hall**. William Collier's map of 1741 bears a drawing of the north-west front of this house (Pl. LVII). This shows an impressive two-storeyed building (with attics) which consisted of a main block seventeen bays long, with an attached and slightly projecting three-bay block at its south-west end (which in turn had a one-bay lean-to structure attached to its outer wall); an additional north-eastern wing is shown on the map, but is hidden by the church on the elevation drawing (the angle of this wing on Fig. 92 is inferred from earthwork evidence and known foundations). A comparison of the earthworks of the surrounding garden features with the plan of 1741 indicates that the main range had overall dimensions of some 54m long and up to 10m wide (see Fig. 92). Despite being apparently all under one roof, the cornice line and the plan suggest that the main block in fact consisted of a nine-bay central section, flanked by narrower and plainer four-bay wings, one of which had its own doorway with a bracketed hood. The central part broke forward progressively – one bay, then two bays and finally a central three-bay section beneath a pediment and centred on a doorway with a bracketed hood. Collier's map indicates that the house was very irregular in plan and curiously narrow in relation to its length. It is clear that Bridgeman incorporated an earlier structure into one of the projecting ranges at the rear of his house (see below), but there are no obvious signs that he incorporated the earlier hall into the central section of his new house, for paradoxically this is the most regular part of the whole structure. The irregularity may in fact be the result of a designer-owner making continuous additions, but without the guidance of a preconceived overall plan. This would fit with what is known of Orlando's character, which suggests that he was a man of strong opinions, but perhaps limited abilities.

The private house that now bears the name of *Combs Hall* is a single-storeyed building of mixed construction, with an inserted attic storey. The north-east end has 18th-century brick walls, but has a three-bay clasped-purlin roof of likely 16th-century date. The south-west end, in contrast, is a four-bayed timber-framed structure of 17th-century date, also with a clasped-purlin roof. The two parts of the house, both of which have unusually high walls and ceilings, are separated by an 18th-century brick chimney stack. In the south-east wall of the brick section there are two large circular windows (1.5m in diameter) in plain wooden frames; these are now blocked, but originally occupied a large part of the external free height of the wall. The building can be identified on Collier's map of 1741, where it is shown as an attached range at the rear of Bridgeman's house. Pennington's map of 1772 shows the corridor (?) that connected it to the main house as still existing, but this had gone by 1843,<sup>16</sup> leaving the present house as the last standing remnant of Bridgeman's house. The original function of this range is not clear. In 1919 Farrer described this as 'a large cottage, originally the stables connected with the mansion', and his photograph of it is labelled 'The Old Stables'.<sup>17</sup> The high ceilings would be consistent with a stable, but the presence of a large chimney stack suggests a more domestic use, perhaps a kitchen, brewhouse or wash-house, where again high

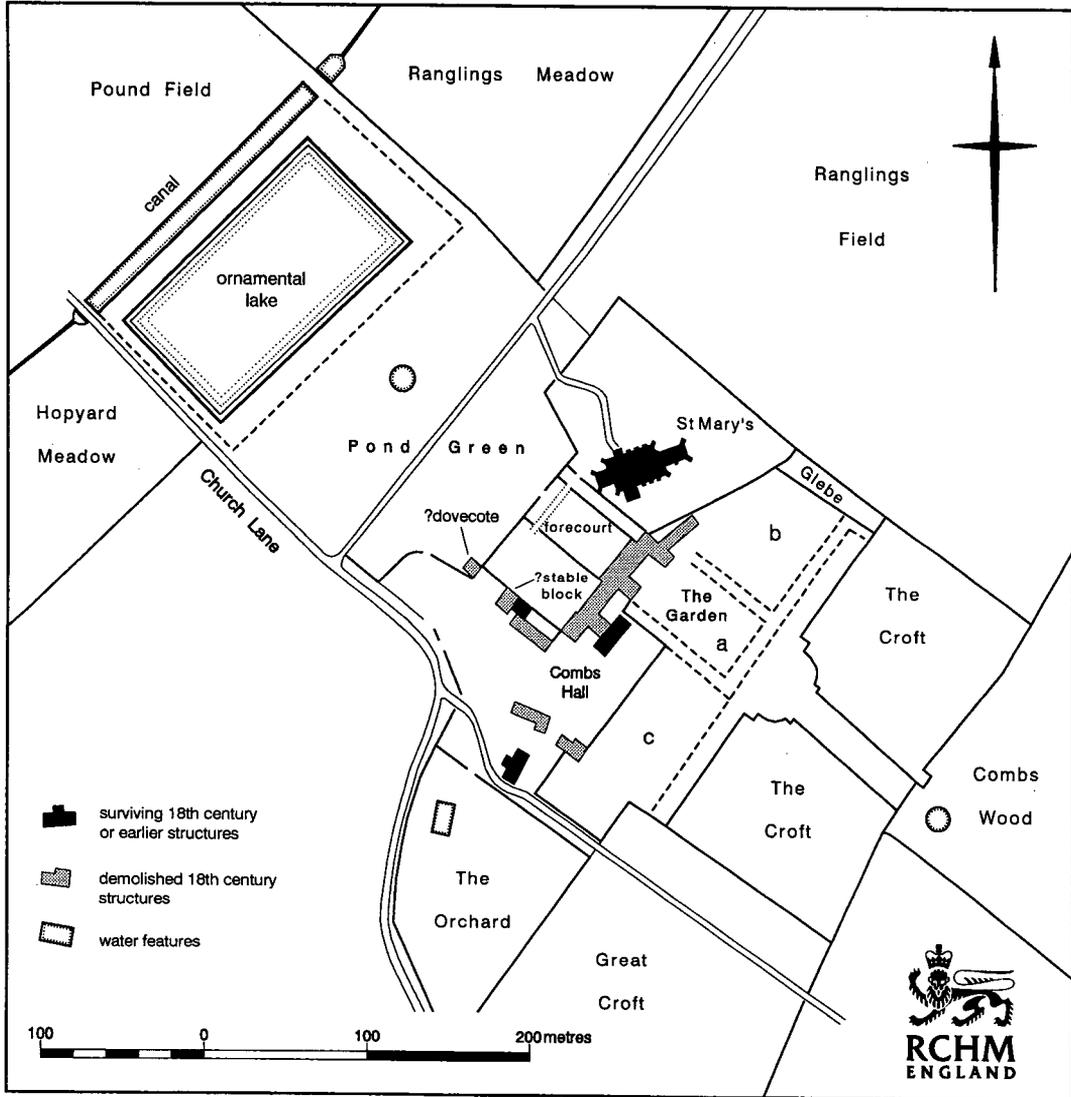


FIG. 92 – Interpretation of the garden earthworks and hypothetical reconstruction of the buildings.

ceilings would be advantageous. Tallemach's 1710 map shows a schematic barn or farm building in roughly this position and parts of that structure may have been incorporated into the present house. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, materials from the pre-1724 manor house may have been re-used in the construction of this range – the circular windows could be those shown on the 1710 vignette. It is unlikely that the single-storey thatched range shown on the vignette is the existing building because the latter is situated too far to the south-east.

To the south-west of the house, across a courtyard, Collier shows a relatively tall single-storey building, some 20m long, crowned by a decorative cupola and weather vane. Part of this building survives as a three-bay timber-framed barn, 8m long and 6.5m wide. This appears to be 17th-century in date and is presumably the building shown in that position on Tallemach's map, even

though that structure is shown side-on, rather than end-on, as would be expected from the orientation of the standing building. The position of the building relative to the front of the house, and its decorative embellishments, make it likely that this was Bridgeman's **stable block**, adapted from an earlier structure.

In the farmyard to the south of the main house, a five-bay timber-framed barn, now called **Combs Hall Barn**, has been converted into a house and was not inspected in detail by the R.C.H.M.E. The 1710 map shows a structure in this approximate position, but again the orientation is wrong in relation to the standing building. The barn is however clearly shown on the 1741 map. Two other buildings in the farmyard are shown on the 1741 map – these have now disappeared but their building platforms were identified in the survey. Another platform was identified on the corner of **Pond Green**, where the 1741 map shows a small square structure, which may also be depicted on the edge of Collier's elevation drawing as a tall building with a pyramidal roof. A building is shown in the same position on the 1710 map. Its size, position and possible appearance in elevation suggest that this was a **dovecot**.

### *The Gardens*

The vignette on the map of 1710 depicts a modest garden to the rear of the house, consisting of rectangular beds divided by straight paths and enclosed by a paling fence. As has already been suggested, this may represent Orlando Bridgeman's first attempt at designing a garden, *c.* 1710. This area was later incorporated into Bridgeman's much grander garden, but with some changes. The rectangular beds immediately to the rear of the house appear to have been swept away and replaced by a broad flat walkway, but the broad path and the beds to the left may however have survived, as they look very much like the surviving narrow terrace aligned north-west-south-east and the sunken parterre beyond it. This would suggest that Bridgeman's initial work involved the creation of a flat platform cut into the slope, the scarp of which was later exploited for the large terrace.

It is likely that Orlando Bridgeman redesigned and enlarged the gardens at about the same time as he rebuilt the house in 1724. The gardens were laid out about a long north-west to south-east axis that ran from the top of the hill behind the house, down the side of the valley, across the stream at the bottom and up the valley side beyond to the road. The house was sited across this axis at its approximate mid-point. Although this axis runs for 980m, the gardens themselves are only about 175m wide at the most. The layout is largely symmetrical about this axis, except that the sunken parterre to the north-east of the house is not balanced by a matching parterre on the south-east side, but by what seems to have been a kitchen garden and part of the farmyard. The house forms a second axis in the garden, at right angles to the first, as can be seen by the symmetrical placing of the two round ponds at equal distances either side of the house.

In front of the middle nine bays of Bridgeman's house and precisely on the long axis of the garden, Collier shows a rectangular forecourt set with lines of small fastigiate trees (probably conifers) and bounded on two sides by low walls and, opposite the house, by iron railings with an elaborate gate at their centre. Smaller gates at either end of the railings led into adjoining compartments. The 1756 sale advertisements mention 'one iron palisade with pair of iron gates ten feet high, besides the ornamental work, and pilasters by the sides; also two other pair of iron gates and palisades, very handsome and good'. The area of this forecourt was terraced up to 0.8m into the natural slope to create an almost level area. A broad path, which survives as a low bank with slight channels on either side, bisected the compartment and ascended to the front door by a flight of steps whose position can still be seen, although the Portland stone steps were sold off after the demolition of the house. A shallow depression at right angles to the end of the path could have been a driveway, though no such feature is shown on Collier's map, even though he does show other roads and tracks. The map seems to indicate that the gates and railings stood on the edge of the steep bank that separates the forecourt from Pond Green; the elevation drawing however does not seem to show any steps leading up to the gates, as would surely have been necessary. It is therefore possible that there was an access way along the top of the bank in front of the railings. The early 18th-century bird's-eye views of Knyff and Kip

(1707) indicate that it was not always necessary to have carriage access right up to the principal front of a house, and this was probably the case at Combs.

The gate at the northern end of the railings is shown on the map as leading to a narrow alley, which survives as a raised walk, 6m wide and 0.4m high on average, which now lies partly in the churchyard, but originally seems to have led straight to one of the side wings of the house. The gate at the southern end of the railings led to a more utilitarian-looking courtyard enclosed by a wooden fence, but of similar dimensions to the formal forecourt. Access to the house from this courtyard was possible through two side doors. From the position of the putative stable block on one side, it is most likely that this was a stable yard, with perhaps an entrance in the south-east corner, although one is not actually indicated by Collier.

The area named as **Pond Green** on the 1741 map is now known as Church Meadow, but was called 'Carthouse Close' on the 1710 map, where it is shown as containing three structures, one of which was presumably the eponymous carthouse. The presence of various buildings in this close suggests that it was probably a grassed area that functioned as an additional yard to the manor complex. The space is bisected from south-west to north-east by a straight track which is the main access to the church. This track is first shown for certain on the 1741 map, but a faint and broken line on the 1710 map may indicate its presence before then, especially as no other access is indicated on the earlier map. Its existence was probably one of the constraints in Bridgeman's design for the garden. Another constraint was the shape of the churchyard, which juts out on one side of Pond Green. Bridgeman overcame this by creating an equal and balancing shape on the other side of his axis. He also planted trees along the edges of Pond Green to direct viewers' eyes down the axial vista of the garden. Collier's elevation drawing, but not his map, indicates that between the churchyard and its answering shape on the other side of the axis, there was a rectangular enclosure with a simple post and rail wooden fence. This seems to have been intended as an extension to the main forecourt, and the gates shown in the middle of the north-west side may have abutted the trackway to the church. However a minimal linear depression along the central axis, which shows clearly on an aerial photograph taken in 1979<sup>18</sup> (Pl. LVIII) continues down to the round pond on the other side of the track, as do two slight parallel ditches that must have run alongside the sides of the fenced enclosure. It is possible that the enclosure functioned as a carriage halt, for broadly similar front enclosures with that function can be seen in some of Knyff and Kip's views, but the linear depressions and their clear relationship with the round pond argue against this. The pond is 11.5m in diameter and up to 0.5m deep and is sited on the main axis of the garden. It lies within a broader circular depression, with an irregular embankment downhill, and slight terraces extend at right angles across most of the width of Pond Green.

A brick-lined culvert was exposed during the digging of a septic tank in the area of the stable yard, and this may account for the prominent bank that leads from this spot across Pond Green on the same alignment as the garden axis. Throughout Pond Green there are traces of earlier features underlying the 18th-century earthworks which are too slight and disparate to interpret.

In the valley bottom Bridgeman created a rectangular **ornamental lake** or basin which spanned the whole width of the garden. In doing so, Bridgeman probably adapted an existing pond, since the field is called 'Reed Pond Meadow' on the 1710 map and 'Redeponde Medowe' in the survey of 1581. The lake is 120m long and 65m wide, with a maximum depth of 0.8m. A smaller pond, dug into its eastern corner before 1884 (Ordnance Survey 1885), has recently been enlarged to encourage wildlife, slightly distorting the 18th-century design. The lake is dammed by a broad bank 36m wide and 1.5m high, the inner face of which is divided into a double terrace walk. The upper walk continues around the other three sides of the lake, while the lower one extends only along the north-east end.

Immediately beyond the lake, the 1741 map shows an ornamental **canal** formed by damming the stream. The stream has now eroded an almost sheer-sided channel along the centre of the canal, leaving only slight traces of the original feature, which appears to have been 12m wide and 165m long, with a probable depth of less than 1m.

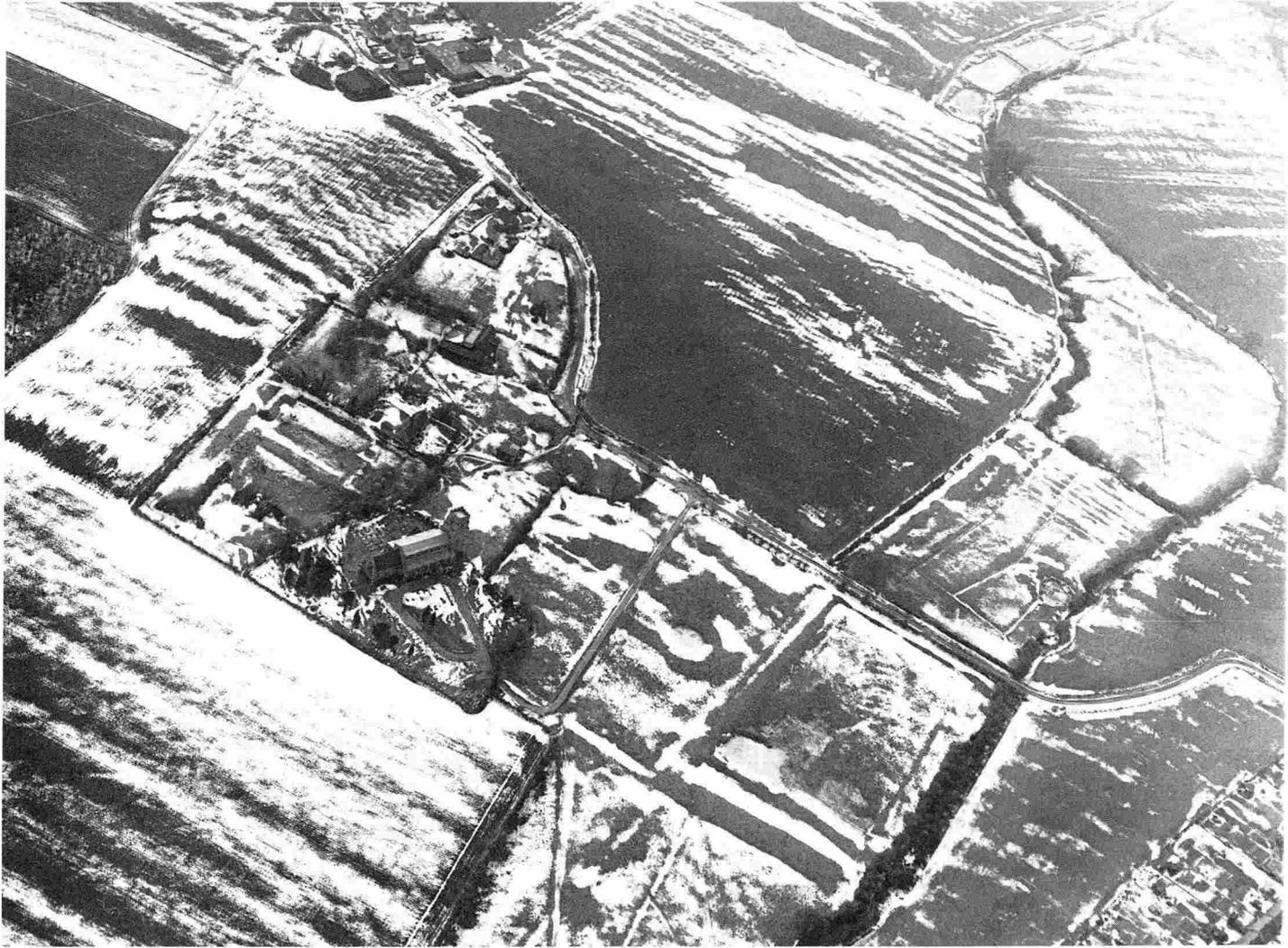


PLATE LVIII – Aerial photograph of the remains of the Combs Hall garden under a light covering of snow,  
23 February 1979 (*Suffolk Archaeological Unit AJJ6*).



PLATE LIX – Photograph taken by the Revd Edmund Farrer, *c.* 1919, of compartment (a) of the garden, looking S.E. towards the long terrace and showing the numerous elm pollards (*S.R.O.I., HD 78: 2671*).

Beyond the canal, the vista was continued across **Pound Field** to the skyline on **Poplar Hill** by a broad avenue the full width of the garden, defined on each side by lines of trees planted in square clumps, each clump containing nine trees, a variant of the normal quincunx pattern with five trees. The avenue and its clumps of trees were still there in 1772 (in 'Park Field') but have now gone, leaving no trace. The laying out of the avenue necessitated the diversion of **Church Lane** from its earlier course.

To the rear of the house, the axis of the garden is mis-aligned by some 7m to the north-east of its counterpart in front of the house, probably as a result of Bridgeman's decision to incorporate his earlier garden into the enlarged design. Due to the rising ground, the far end of the rear vista could only have been seen from the upper storey of the house. **The Garden**, as shown on the 1741 map, consisted of three approximately rectangular compartments terraced into the natural slope immediately to the rear of the house and bounded on the south-east side by a large terrace which spans the width of the garden at right angles to the long axis. These earthworks are all substantial, but are only indicated by dashed lines on the 1741 map. The raised walks and terraces were all edged by lines of pollarded elms. These are not shown on the 1741 map but are indicated by spots on the 1772 map. Most were removed after the Second World War, but eight dead specimens still stand to varying heights at the south-west end of the long terrace, separated by an average interval of some 6m. Some of these pollards can be seen in a photograph taken by Edmund Farrer *c.* 1919<sup>19</sup> (Pl. LIX) and also more generally on some aerial photographs.

The central compartment (**a** on plan), 44m long by 31m wide, is aligned along the main axis and appears to have been a broad walkway. At either end there are indications of staircases, which were probably robbed out in the 18th century. The north-west end of the compartment

steps up 1.3m from the house terrace, and the opposite end cuts into the hillside to a maximum depth of 0.8m, so that there is a very slight slope upwards away from the house. Two square projections in the upper corners may have supported statuary or other ornaments; five lead statues are mentioned in the 1756 sale advertisements. The compartment is flanked by raised walkways 5m wide, which project at right angles from the main terrace across the garden.

Compartment **b** is trapezoidal, 57m long by 35m to 69m wide and lies approximately 0.5m lower down the natural slope than compartment **a**. It is shown on the 1741 map as an elaborate parterre with diagonal paths leading to a central square basin, which has now been infilled. A ring of pollarded elms around the pond, which are not shown by Collier, but do appear as a loose group of spots on the 1772 map, was removed after the Second World War. The earthwork remains within the compartment are very slight, with the exception of a broad linear depression, up to 0.3m deep, which extends on a north-west to south-east alignment on either side of the infilled pond. This corresponds closely in position and alignment to the boundary of the area marked as 'The Yard' on the 1710 map. The narrow north-east wing of the house, which adjoins the south-west corner of this compartment, may have been an orangery or a summerhouse of some sort. To the north-east of compartment **b** there was a narrow strip of **glebe** land which lay outside the garden.

Compartment **c** which formed part of the area marked as 'Barnyards' on the 1710 map, was formed by Bridgeman into a garden containing eight rectangular beds, screened from the farmyard by a brick wall, part of which survives. The relatively simple layout of the beds and their proximity to the farmyard suggests that this was a garden for fruit and vegetables; however it was clearly intended to form part of the formal garden (as a balance to the parterre in compartment **b**) and is therefore likely to have been of an ornamental nature.

The raised terrace walk, with a lower walk where it adjoins compartments **a** and **b**, extends for 160m along the rear of the three compartments. The lower part stands up to 1.5m higher than compartment **b**, and the upper part has a maximum height of 0.6m, which raises it slightly above the level of The Crofts. Interestingly, from the large terrace there is a view northwards across the valley to the canal-side terrace of the garden of Alice Bridgeman's uncle, Charles Blossie of Abbot's Hall, Stowmarket.

To the rear of the terrace, a semi-circular exedra with angled projections, probably for the siting of statues or garden ornaments, developed into a broad axial walkway that stretched out towards Combs Wood, flanked by two matching compartments called **The Crofts**. The lines of the exedra and the walkway survived into the 20th century,<sup>20</sup> but the walkway is now only discernible as a broad shallow depression in an arable field, with a more prominent embankment along its south-west side. The Crofts each measured approximately 80m square and were planted with formal settings of pollarded elms. The trees in the south-west compartment survived until the area was ploughed in the Second World War. This was clearly a formal 'wilderness' garden or *bosquet*, and in fact the area was known locally as 'The Wilderness'.<sup>21</sup> In 1710 this was part of two fields called 'Great Crofts' and 'Little Crofts'.

The 'wilderness' of The Crofts was probably intended as a 'bridge' between the strictly formal parts of the garden and the true wilderness of **Combs Wood**, an irregular deciduous wood of about 15ha. This is an ancient coppice wood, now owned and managed by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, which is recorded as 'Comby's Haye and Prestwod' in the survey of 1581 ('haye' or 'hey' being a locally common term for woodland) and simply as 'The Wood' on the 1710 map. Combs Wood did not form a continuous backing for The Crofts and so Bridgeman seems to have added an extra stand of trees to the south-west of the wood to give this impression. The stand of trees was still there in 1772, but had gone by the late 19th century. Brickwork, most probably the remains of a bridge, was uncovered during the re-cutting of the boundary ditch around the wood at the point where the garden axis crosses it. Immediately beyond this lies a second circular pond, 10m in diameter and 0.6m deep, surrounded by a walk and concentric embankment. This earthwork then opens out to become the sides of a cutting and then an embankment for a straight ride that extends for 280m along the garden axis through the wood to its south-east edge.

There is no evidence that the vista was ever continued any further, or that there was any eye-catcher at this point. At its mid-point the woodland ride intersects with a second major ride, which extends to the north-east end of Combs Wood and interconnects with various minor paths.

Earthworks were also recorded in the area called **The Orchard** on the 1741 map, but which had been a part of the field called 'Great Crofts' in 1710. Although there were possibly some ornamental aspects to the area, such as the deep rectangular pond, it was probably not an integral part of the garden.

## DISCUSSION

Neither the house nor the gardens of Combs Hall is exceptionally grand or innovative by the standard of many 18th-century great houses, but there are several aspects of the site that deserve attention.

Firstly, the superb preservation of the earthworks allows a much more detailed level of analysis of the gardens than do the documentary and cartographic sources alone. Inevitably there are some areas of disagreement between the different strands of evidence. The 1741 map emerges as being remarkably accurate, though some crucial details concerning the layout of the forecourts, and the access to them, seem to have been omitted or over-simplified. The ornamental settings of pollards around the walkways at the rear of the house also seem to have been left off. The evidence of the 1710 map has proved more problematic, especially the internal disagreement between the map itself and the vignette at its top; however it has proved invaluable in establishing the continuity of some earlier features into the later landscape. The earthworks also add considerable detail to the framework provided by the maps. The considerable vertical element in the terraces and platforms to the rear of the house is not really apparent from the maps, but is clearly demonstrated in the earthwork survey. The survey did however fail to locate a grotto, whose existence is implied by the mention of 'a Collection of Grotto-Shells' in the 1756 sale particulars. This could have been built into the now overgrown scarp between the parterre and the long terrace.

Secondly, the tight dating of the garden created by Orlando Bridgeman between 1710 and 1731 and its almost immediate abandonment without further alteration is significant in terms of garden history, in that it gives an unusually clear picture of the layout favoured by a gentleman of only moderate wealth and influence. This is especially important as modern perceptions of the gardens of the early 18th century have tended to be dominated by the usually much better documented gardens of the wealthy and noble elite, as typified by the bird's-eye views of Knyff and Kip. Most of the features of Bridgeman's design are typical of the early 18th century: in particular the use of symmetry and the creation of features with formal geometric shapes. The creation of the formal lake and canal can be seen as yet another manifestation of the strong passion for fashionable garden canals which is apparent amongst the Suffolk gentry in the early part of the 18th century (Martin *et al.* 1993). However it is also tempting to see a Dutch influence in the management of water here, for not only did Orlando Bridgeman's mother belong to a Dutch family which had an involvement in water engineering (she was a niece of Sir Philibert Vernatti, one of Sir Cornelius Vermuyden's partners in the draining of the Fens), but his father also had strong connections with Amsterdam. His exploitation of the valley side for the axis of his garden is however very un-Dutch and much more Italian in its conception. Orlando's mother's family had apparently come to Holland from Italy, but it is not known whether any connection with Italy was still being maintained by Orlando's day. An axial element is common in gardens of this date, but Bridgeman's garden is unusual for its length in relation to its width. It is this element that gives a distinctive character to the garden design. Whether it was the result of a comprehensive overall plan or continuous expansion is not however clear, though the evidence of the house suggests the latter. Despite its formal nature, the garden retains a slightly organic feel.

Although Bridgeman was able to effect some major changes in the landscape, most notably in

diverting the course of Church Lane, he was clearly constrained by existing features in his garden design, especially as he chose to build his new house on or near the site of the earlier manor house. The intrusion of the churchyard was mitigated by the creation of an answering shape on the other side of the axis. To the rear of the house, Bridgeman retained the farmyard, probably out of convenience, even though it distorted the symmetry. The existing rear garden also seems to have been incorporated into the new design. In retaining or adapting existing features Bridgeman was doing something that was common even in much grander gardens: for instance at Melton Constable in Norfolk, Sir Jacob Astley retained an earlier walled garden and a series of large fishponds, even though the latter clearly did not fit with the axis of his new garden (Taigel and Williamson 1991, 76).

The survey revealed little in the way of earthworks that could be construed as the remains of a shrunken medieval village, as has been alleged previously.<sup>22</sup> It seems likely that Combs is yet another example of that frequent settlement pattern of the Suffolk claylands, where a manorial hall and an adjacent church occur in isolation (Dymond 1968, 29; Martin 1988, 72–73). The origins of this pattern are probably to be found in the Late Saxon period. The presence of a small amount of glebe land adjacent to the church may suggest that there was once a parsonage house here too, but if so it had been moved elsewhere in the parish by 1710.

In 1984 the lower part of the garden was threatened with destruction. Rubble was dumped alongside the large rectangular pond in preparation for in-filling it, and plans were discussed for the building of houses in the area in front of the church. Luckily these plans were changed and the lower part is now in public ownership and in active management as a local nature reserve. As part of this management, the dump of rubble was removed in 1994 and the round pond nearby was de-silted. It is hoped that this study will help the restoration process by providing a key to the former glory of Orlando Bridgeman's great garden.

#### SURVEY METHODS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Level 3 earthwork survey was carried out by Alastair Oswald and Jane Kenney, and the architectural analysis by Robert Taylor, all of the R.C.H.M.E. Control points and hard detail were surveyed using a Wild TC1610 Electronic Theodolite with integral EDM. Data was captured on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module and plotted via computer on a Calcomp 3024 plotter. The details of the earthwork plan were supplied at 1:1000 scale with Fibron tapes using normal graphical methods, and re-drawn for publication by Trevor Pearson of the R.C.H.M.E. The site archive has been deposited in the National Monuments Record, Kemble Drive, Swindon (TM 05 NE 54).

Thanks are due to the landowners: Mid Suffolk District Council, the Suffolk Wildlife Trust and, in particular, to Dr A. Wankowski and Mr and Mrs P. Broom, whose enthusiasm and information were equally welcome. Christopher Taylor's experience and inspiration were, as usual, invaluable. This account is published courtesy of the Commissioners.

#### NOTES

- 1 Archaeology Section, Suffolk County Council.
- 2 Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.
- 3 Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich, HA 1/EB3/3, f.148.
- 4 S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/2/1.
- 5 S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/2/4.
- 6 S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/1/8.
- 7 S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/1/18.
- 8 S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/3/5.

- 9 S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/1/22.
- 10 S.R.O.I., HA 93/12/81/2-12 & 15; HB 43: 2400.
- 11 S.R.O.I., HA 1/EA/1/23.
- 12 S.R.O.I., P 638.
- 13 29 May, 5 and 19 June, 31 July, 7 and 28 August, and 4 September.
- 14 S.R.O.I., HA 1/HB4/1.
- 15 S.R.O.I., HA 1/EB3/3,f.148.
- 16 S.R.O.I., P 461/67.
- 17 S.R.O.I., HD 78: 2671.
- 18 Suffolk Archaeological Unit, photograph AJJ6.
- 19 S.R.O.I., HD 78: 2671.
- 20 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map 1885 and second edition 1905.
- 21 Pers. comm., Mrs C. Broom.
- 22 Suffolk Sites and Monuments Record no. COM010.

#### REFERENCES

- Copinger, W.A., 1910. *The Manors of Suffolk*, vol. 6. Manchester.
- Corder, J., 1981. *The Visitation of Suffolk, 1561*, Part 1. Harleian Soc., N.S., II. London.
- Dymond, D.P., 1968. 'The Suffolk Landscape' in Munby, L.M. (ed.), *East Anglian Studies*. Cambridge.
- Eden, P., 1975. *Dictionary of Land Surveyors and Local Cartographers of Great Britain and Ireland 1550-1850*, Part I.
- Farrer, E., 1919. 'Combs Hall', *East Anglian Miscellany*, no. 5498.
- Flinn, M.W., 1962. *Men of Iron: The Crowleys in the Early Iron Industry*. Edinburgh.
- Hayton, D. (ed.), forthcoming. *History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1690-1714*.
- Henning, B.D. (ed.), 1983. *History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1660-1690*. London.
- Hervey, S.H.A., 1905. *Suffolk in 1674, The Hearth Tax*, Suffolk Green Books no. XI vol. 13. Woodbridge.
- Jones, D., 1991. 'Eighteenth-century splendour in Badley and Combs', *Archive News* (newsletter of the Suffolk Record Office), 2nd series no. 4. Ipswich.
- Kirby, J., 1735. *The Suffolk Traveller*. Ipswich.
- Knyff, L. and Kip, J., 1707. *Britannia Illustrata*. London.
- Martin, E., 1988. 'Deserted and sparsely populated settlements' in Dymond, D. and Martin, E. (eds.), *An Historical Atlas of Suffolk*. Ipswich.
- Martin, E., Easton, T. and McKechnie, I., 1993. 'Conspicuous display: the extraordinary garden and buildings of a minor gentry family in mid Suffolk', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XXXVIII pt. 1, 56-74.
- Q.F.V.F., 1870. 'The Vernatti family and its connections', *The Herald and Genealogist*, 5, 146-155.
- Redstone, L.J., 1939. 'Inventory of the records deposited by the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology at the Ipswich Public Library', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XXIII pt. 3, 187-201.
- Smith, A. Hassell and Baker, G.M. 1982/3. *Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey*, II. Norfolk Record Soc., vol. XLIX. Norwich.
- Steer, F.W., 1957. 'The Dandy pedigree', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XXVII pt. 3, 133-53.
- Taigel, A. and Williamson, T., 1991. 'Some early geometric gardens in Norfolk', *J. of Garden Hist.*, 11 nos. 1 and 2.

*This article has been published with the aid of a grant from the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.*