

1. THE MEDIEVAL GARDENS OF CLARE CASTLE



Based on his fascinating talk at the SAA conference in November 2011, Edward Martin provides the first in a series of articles on some of the lost historical gardens of Suffolk

The Norman motte with the remains of the keep, viewed from the 19th-century station platform. The area in between would, in the 14th century, have been filled with imposing buildings bedecked with banners and other symbols of lordship. The spiral path up the motte was added in 1848 by a Mr J. B. Armstead.

Documentary evidence for England's medieval gardens is very scarce, but the gardens of Clare Castle have the good luck of frequent mentions in the fourteenth-century estate records of Elizabeth de Burgh, known as 'the Lady of Clare'. Elizabeth was born in 1295 into a family of great prestige and wealth, being the youngest daughter of Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Hertford and Gloucester and a granddaughter of King Edward I. She was married at thirteen to the heir to the earldom of Ulster, but was widowed by the time she was eighteen; a year later her only brother was killed at the battle of Bannockburn and she became a co-heiress to the huge de Clare estate – her portion being the East Anglian estates and the lordship of Usk in Monmouthshire. Her second husband only lasted five months and the third only lasted five years; so by the age of 27 she was a widow three times over. Not surprisingly, she then seems to have decided to live as an independent woman – principally at Clare Castle, her family's ancestral seat. However she remained religiously and culturally active – founding Clare College in Cambridge in 1336 and a Franciscan friary at Walsingham in 1347. She died in 1360 and was buried in the church of the Convent of the Minoresses at Aldgate, London, within whose precinct she had a house. Her tomb is lost, but was so impressive that the earl of Pembroke expressed a wish for a similar one in 1375.

The estate accounts record these features of her gardens at Clare:-

The Great Garden: In 1347 sand was taken ‘from the mount next the Lady’s chamber’ to the *herbarium* [garden] and two men spent two days sanding, strewing and gathering stones in the garden and walks. The garden was cleaned and railed with rods around the walks [*aluras*] and turf was dug near *Clarethall* (Claret Hall across the Stour in Ashen in Essex) and brought in to repair the surface of the ‘Great Garden’. In 1345–6 Michael the carpenter worked on the Lady’s garden for three weeks and iron casements were supplied for two glass windows in the Lady’s upper chamber, from which she might look down at the garden. In 1352 a fountain costing £2 16s 11½d was made in the castle and the garden was again railed. The location of this garden is uncertain, but a strong contender is the rectangular enclosure (D on the map) to the east of the inner bailey (B) that contained the castle’s domestic buildings. Unfortunately, this area was badly damaged when the railway was put through it in 1865 and twentieth-century enlargement of the surrounding moat and the cutting of a new channel to convert the remains of the enclosure into a ‘wildlife island’ for water birds.



Clare Castle as shown on the 1846 tithe map (Suffolk Record Office, T146/1). A is the Norman motte crowned by the remains of a thirteenth-century stone keep; B is the inner bailey, which contained the domestic buildings (halls, chambers, chapel, kitchen, brewhouse, bakehouse etc); C is the outer bailey; D is the likely site of the castle gardens.

The pool: In 1342 there is mention of ‘the pool above the garden, part of the moat’. In 1351 a payment of 4d was made to two little children ‘who fished in front of my Lady’ on the 23 May. In 1388 two men were paid for work about the pool [*stagnum*] in *le Clogardyn* for keeping fish there. This could be the large rectangular pool, surrounded by a geometrical arrangement of four smaller pools, that is shown on the 1846 tithe map in enclosure D. None of these ponds is now visible on the ‘wildlife island’.

The sepulchre and the tomb: In 1342 Robert the carpenter was paid 3d a day for five days to make a ‘tomb’ above a ‘sepulchre’ in the lady’s garden (William his mate was paid 2½d for the same period). In 1343 two sawyers sawed boards for the ‘tomb’ in the Lady’s garden to make rails, a ground sill, lintels, pillars and studs ‘for the said screen [*parclos*]’, taking thirteen days and being paid 6s 6d. William the carpenter covered [*tegent*] the tomb [*tumb* written above *sepultur* deleted] for three days and was paid 7½d. This is a confusing feature to find in a garden, but the most likely explanation is that this was a circular timber structure modelled on the Holy Sepulchre Church in Jerusalem, the rotunda of which contains a structure reputed to be Christ’s tomb. Numerous copies of the Holy Sepulchre and its tomb were made across medieval Europe (eg. San Sepulcro in Bologna, Italy and the round church of Holy Sepulchre in Cambridge). The Lady may have sat and contemplated in her sepulchre with a prayer book or a ‘book of hours’ produced by her own illuminator (illuminators are recorded in the accounts in 1339 and 1351).

The houses for the animals: In 1342 a ‘certain house’ in the garden was roofed for the Lady’s deer, and this was done again ten years later. This suggests that she had an enclosure where she kept tame fallow deer. In the same year two men also repaired ‘the glass chamber in the house of the pheasants’ [*camera vitrea in domo feysants*]. Pheasants were valued as creatures of living colour and had been introduced into Britain by the mid-twelfth century (they are native to central Asia and south-east Russia), so this was probably a form of aviary, but the glass chamber could be the earliest known example of a glasshouse for plants. Swans were also kept on the water around the castle.

The vineyard: In 1341 William, the castle gardener, was paid 2s for going to various places to get vine scions to plant, and in 1343 four cartloads of rods were brought to support vines by the Great Gate of the castle. The Great Gate lay between the two castle baileys, so this suggests that the vineyard was in the outer bailey (C on the map). The outer bailey was also the site of a garden growing items for sale – beans, herbs, leeks, onions and madder for dye. It also housed the Lady’s ‘Great Kennel’ for her huntsmen and hunting dogs. There was another garden, together with barns and stables, in the earthwork enclosure at the northern end of Clare that the Lady would have known as *Erbury*, but is now called Clare Camp. This produced foodstuffs for the castle, but also for sale.

Very little remains of the Lady of Clare’s gardens. Her tomb is lost, but she can perhaps take consolation from the fact that despite the death and danger that beset so many members of her family, one of her descendants is now Queen of England.