Stephen Wass, ***Seventeenth-century Water Gardens and the Birth of Modern Scientific Thought in Oxford: the Case of Hanwell Castle***, Oxford: Windgather Press, 240 pp., 2022, £39.95.

There are myriad routes to approach garden history, and a plethora of lenses through which to view the subject. There are the gardeners and the garden techniques that they employed. There are the garden owners and their motivations for investing time and money into what is some cases is a statement of wealth and an attempt to acquire social status. Maybe Edith Warton was correct when she stated that 'money is the best manure', even if this can create a garden without a heart. There are gardens that are not an ephemeral work of art, and a garden that has existed for centuries can be good lens though which to trace the history of gardening.

Another history could look at the development of gardens for different goals such as studying botany or growing fruit and veg. Then there is the wider social context that results in gardens reflecting what is happening over the garden walls or hedges. For example, the rise of allotments and the sometimes anarchic sub-culture that they facilitate. More recently the desire to create a safe place for animals of all shapes and sizes (with the exception of slugs and snails of course) reflects an awareness of the decline in wildlife.

This book takes several of these routes. The cover places the story at Hanwell. The creations and destructions and recent resurrection of the gardens is a theme running through the text. The story focusses particularly on the development of water gardens both at Hanwell and beyond. This in itself is one chapter in the rich history of water gardens alone would fill several books taking in fifth century BCE garden at Sigiriya Rock in Sri Lanka to the twenty-first century water garden at Alnwick Castle in Northumberland. In this part of the narrative one is made aware of the massive effort that went into creating dams that are over one hundred metres long in order to create one of the major ponds at Hanwell.

The lives of the owners of the castle beyond Oxfordshire are described. The family feuds and squabbles are described along with how easy it is to run up eye-watering debts, amounting to £20 million pounds in present money, ostensibly in the development of a castle and grounds. Through the lives of the Copes of Hanwell many other important characters pass albeit fleetingly. For example, both John Ray (the true father of modern taxonomy (it was not Linnaeus)) and Henry Danvers (the benefactor of the Oxford University Botanic Garden) are mentioned just once.

Some of the characters receive a fuller assessment. Sir Francis Bacon's contribution to gardening and science are particularly relevant to this story and resonate today. For example, his assertion that a path should be wide enough for four people to walk side by side is manifested today in the need for paths in public gardens to be wide enough for two wheelchairs to pass comfortably.

It is Bacon's pivotal role in the development of the scientific method and the development of the fledgling Royal Society down the road in Oxford that occupies much of the book. The text seems to suggest that the Oxford became something of a scientific back water towards the end of the seventeenth century with no 'other outdoor spaces seriously dedicated to science'. This may be harsh in the area of botany. Robert Morrison and the two Bobarts at the Oxford Botanic Garden do not even get a name check, which seems slightly unfair.

However, a central thread in the story comes from Robert Plot's *Natural History of Oxfordshire*. Plot describes a 'House of Diversion' in the centre of one of the ponds at Hanwell. Evidence of this is found, but it is tantalisingly incomplete. A total of 1,500 hours of meticulous archaeological investigation is described fully as well as the many finds. Among these finds are the almost complete set of fragments from several large terracotta pots and containers that are thought to have stood on the balustrade of the House of Diversions. It is anticipated that these digs will take another decade of work to analyse fully and critically.

A book with so many different themes and threads could go off like an uncontrolled firework. This is not the case because the threads are brought together in the synthesis of the final chapter. Gardens for science, as an artisan test bed, as a laboratory, as a collection, as a social space, and finally as a thinking space are each considered in turn. By its own admission this book asks more questions than it answers. It is a book that deserves to be re-read immediately such is the complexity of the fascinating web of connections.

Timothy Walker, January 2024