

John Boyd's Danson Estate

John Boyd, the son of a West Indian sugar planter, was responsible for the building of Danson House in the Palladian style.

The Danson Estate in 1684

At one time there was, among the title deeds of the estate, a plan dated 1684 which showed the position of the old Danson house and its lands which also indicated the ownership of adjacent property. This plan had been missing for many years. A brochure published at the time of Bexley D.D.C.'s purchase of Danson in 1924 contained a small reproduction of the plan and from this reproduction it is possible with some difficulty to make out most of what the original plan contained.

The old Danson house stood in the valley where the Lake is today. As was customary with estate plans, only the boundaries of land that was actually part of the estate were drawn. Other areas were left blank although the names of landowners were written in. The naming of adjacent landowners is a useful aid to identifying land that was bought at later dates. At the very top of the plan part of the old Roman London-Dover road can be seen, though the curve in it suggests that it may not then have had the straightness usually associated with Roman roads. There is also a junction with a road that runs southward from it: this is our Danson Road at Crook Log. Near the bottom of the plan this road meets another road running from west to east, which is marked on the plan "From Eltham to Blunden" and Blunden [i.e. Blendon] can be seen at the eastern side of the plan. That road is our Blackfen Road.

On the left of the plan Westwood Lane in its original form leaves the Blackfen Road in a north-westerly direction. It passes a wood (called Winterfield Spring) and is then joined at a right angle by a lane which runs northeast, soon turning due north: this corresponds to the modern Danson Lane. It joined the Dover Road at the same point in Welling as Danson Lane does today. Most of the Danson estate in 1684 lay within the area enclosed by the five roads just indicated, although more than half of this area was in other hands. There were some parcels of land belonging to the estate on the east side of Danson Road and one small wood, Asp Spring, south of the Blackfen Road. The effect that the road pattern has changed so little may have us

think that other elements of the local scene were not too different in 1684 from what we are familiar with today. However in some respects things were not at all the same.

The principal feature of the area in 1684 was the large amount of woodland, which extended from the west side of the plan as far as what is now Danson Road and beyond it at some points, except for the little valley where the Lake was later to be formed and a few fields which had been cut from the woods. The word 'field' originally meant a place where the trees had been 'felled' and the plan illustrates this etymology, for several such areas can be seen in it. Similarly the name 'Riddens' was often given to fields so formed. It also indicates that the land had been 'rid' of trees: there is a Riddens field on the plan, plainly a clearing in the wood surrounding it.

The plan leaves blank the areas not belonging to the Danson estate, as I have already said. This obscures the fact that most of the ground was wooded. But unlike West Wood, to the west of the plan, the woodlands in the centre of the plan were divided into parcels of varying sizes; Arley Wood, across the northern part of the estate, contained 77 acres, while Cow Spring had only 3 acres. In the blank part there were Winterfield Wood, Nutlands Wood, Welling Wood, Noyes or Peases Wood, Clays Spring, Tinkers Wood, and Lady Wood.

People were willing to buy fairly small areas of woodland because the income from such holdings was as important as that from arable or pasture land. Nowadays only the very rich or the Forestry Commission can afford a long-term investment like timber production; we look for the quicker return provided by crops. Before the improvements in agriculture achieved in the past 200 years woodland was at least as valuable as agricultural land in the eyes of the average landowner.

Besides Danson House and its associated farm, with barns, sheepfolds, orchards and fields, there were several other farms and smallholdings. Some of the little enclosures on the plan are marked 'John More'. In 1685 there was a transaction between John More, of Crayford, a baker, and Nicholas Barrett, of Bexley, miller, by which More undertook to perform certain covenants made by him. The implication is that he had sold some property to Barrett. Now some years later one of Barrett's daughters who had married Samuel Wyburn inherited from her father a share in a farm at Danson. As

parts of the blank area of the plan of 1684 are marked with the same John Wyburn, we can assume that Samuel Wyburn acquired, partly from his uncle - he was the nephew of John Wyburn - and partly from his wife, the daughter of Nicholas Barrett, an interest in a substantial part of the lands near the old Danson House. His farmhouse stood quite close to it.

Another farm belonged to the Mannings. From later evidence it is apparent that their farm was at the corner of what is now Bean Road and that they owned about 4 acres of land just south of it and some other pieces vaguely indicated by the name of John Manning on the 1684 plan.

At this point we should observe that the road on the 1684 plan corresponding to today's Danson Road does not follow the same line as its modern counterpart. For part of its length it runs further to the west. There is clear evidence that Col. John Selwyn, who leased the Danson estate from 1723 to his death in 1751, bought land from the Wyburns and Mannings in order to divert this road. It used to pass close to the front of the old Danson House and Selwyn arranged to have a new route for it cut at a further distance - a practice followed by many landowners in those days, when local squires in their role as J.P.s readily gave one another permission to block old rights of way and open up new ones.

There is a plan in the collection which shows the old road and its proposed replacement. This plan is of further interest in that it shows the old Danson House and the rectangular lake near it: both were lost when Capability Brown's new lake was made later in the 10th century. The 1684 plan showed both clearly enough for us to see that the old lake was about 300 yards long.

Boyd's additions to the estate

When Col. Selwyn died in 1751 his property at Danson consisted of the original estate which he held on a lay lease and the land he had bought outright from the Wyburns and Mannings. Two years later John Boyd took a 21 year lease of this property from Selwyn's widow and not long after his arrival he set about purchasing it. This was a protracted business, for the land that Selwyn had leased had been tied up by its former owner's will in a complex way and Boyd had to negotiate with several parties, buying one quarter of the estate from

one person, two eighths from two others and for the remainder getting a private Act of Parliament passed. All these processes took nine years to complete but on 24 June 1764 the Act came into effect and Boyd was established as the owner of his estate.

He was not concerned simply with obtaining the ownership of the lands he originally leased: he wanted to add more. While negotiations for the purchase of the main Danson Estate were still in progress, he acquired a small area of land on the east side of Danson Road from the Judds of Upton Farm. This land linked together Mannings Farm and his other land near the stream that flowed past old Danson House. He also bought a house and 10 acres of land near Blendon. These two purchases were in 1759.

Next he cast his eyes on the land immediately to the South of his property. This took a long time to fall into his hands. At first he had to be content with a lease of part of it- two fields by the side of the Danson Road-, which he took in 1760. In that year he also bought two houses on Danson Road. One belonged to James Tapley. Boyd got Tapley to sell his cottage in order that Boyd could pull it down; and in return Boyd undertook to build another cottage for Tapley near a place with the strange name Mud Hall or Mud House, on Stockwell Lane (i.e. Danson Lane). Tapley unfortunately died before the transaction was completed but his daughter joined in a new agreement, by which she was at liberty to take any of the parts of the cottage for her own use when it was pulled down.

The other house bought by Boyd at this time stood near the recently diverted road. It was sold to Boyd by Mary Dobson and her two sons. Her husband, Benjamin Dobson, had just died and his will contained the significant words, "I give to her (his wife) all that I now have in possession, only paying my children one shilling apiece"- though significant of what exactly is not known. He had bought it five weeks earlier, in 1755, from James Gatland of Erith a cordwainer, described as a shoemaker of Erith. James Gatland senior's will is with the Danson Documents. It reads "... which I purchased of Doctor Boreman and Henry Billaway, formerly the estate of Richard Moore..." The Gatlands are mentioned several times in the Erith Memorial records. James was constable of the manor of Erith in 1685 and was one of several fined for having poor and unknown persons (who might be chargeable to the rates) as lodgers in 1698, while in 1700 a Special Court Baron was held at his house. In 1707 he was ordered to help

repair Cross Street. He and his son after him lived in a house in the High Street owned by James Marsh, who also rented one to the then vicar of Erith, Edward Harwood. James Gatland junior was still in it in 1777 but was not there in 1784 - perhaps he had died.

In the following year, 1761, the Lamorbey estate was auctioned following the death of its owner, William Steele. Boyd took the opportunity of buying 47 acres of woodland at this southern boundary, this extending his property well into Blackfen. In the same year he made some more progress in his efforts to get hold of the land to the south of old Danson House. We have here another example of the complexity of problems involved in land-acquisition, problems that were worse then than they are today. In this particular case there is the added difficulty for us in that there are no surviving estate plans or drawings that accurately define the plots of ground under consideration.

The facts as recorded in the deeds are as follows. In August 1761 Boyd purchase from Thomas Pearne, of Deptford, a wheelwright's house and workshop, a barn and yard next to this and three pieces of land called Cross Tree, of 2 acres, Little Clays, of 2 acres, and Great Clays of 4 acres. They were in Blendon the previous year. We cannot fix their relative positions but from what evidence there is it seems possible that the wheelwright's shop may have been the cottage later converted into the Chapel House that still stands so incongruously near a roundabout at Blendon.

Boyd could not at the time buy the property outright, for Thomas Pearne, the vendor, had owned it in right of his wife and when she died it descended by the Kentish custom of gavelkind to her husband and son in equal shares. Their son was then only 9 years old. So Boyd had to be content with the purchase of half of the property - a moiety, as the lawyers have it - and promise that in twelve years' time Pearne would 'procure' his son to convey the other half to Boyd. In the event, Pearne died before the 12 years had elapsed but the son found his father's agreement and voluntarily ratified it in 1774.

Now these pieces of land with the wheelwright's shop and the barn and yard had come to Thomas Pearn's wife by inheritance. She was the daughter of Henry Humphrey, a butcher of Deptford, and Dorothy, his wife. Dorothy's father, and therefore Catherine's Pearne's grandfather, had been John Street, a yeoman of Erith, who died in

1718 and was buried in Erith churchyard. After his death his various properties in Blendon were partitioned between his three daughters, Mary, Dorothy and Katherine. Dorothy received the wheelwright's shop, barn and yard, and Cross Tree and Great and Little clays, as we have seen. Mary and Katherine received similar shares, each consisting mainly of pieces of land of 2 to 4 acres in size, which also lay in or near the same area. Just to make things harder, Mary and Katherine each married a husband called Hamman. Mary was the wife of John Hamman and Katherine the wife of Richard Hamman. I suppose it was a case of two sisters marrying two brothers. Part of Mary Hamman's share of her property was a small wood of about 3 acres. It is possible that she and her husband left this wood to their son, William, who in turn left it to his cousin Katherine - probably a daughter of Katherine and Richard Hamman who married a man named Crossweller. She (being by then a widow) sold it to Boyd in 1784.

I have anticipated things by jumping to 1784 in order to explain the complexities of Boyd's efforts to buy various portions of the land left by John Street of Erith at his death in 1718. To return to the chronological sequence of Boyd's purchases, we found that up to the end of 1761 he had concentrated on rounding off his boundary on the east and south east, though he had also seized an opportunity to buy 47 acres of woodland in Blackfen. At this point his private Act of Parliament went through and he was then firmly established as the owner of the Old Danson Estate. He probably invited Sir Robert Taylor to design his new villa and 'Capability' Brown the park.

It would be wearisome to plod through the purchases made by Boyd over the next 30 years. Some of them were straightforward transactions with little background interest. But others accidentally shed light on people and places not otherwise connected with Danson. I shall therefore pick out a few items from the long series. In 1764 Boyd bought a 6-acre field that lay between his property and the Dover Road and next to his Sankes Field (Danson Mead and its houses more than covered two fields). Through this deal he acquired a bundle of documents as title deeds, which trace the property back to Francis More, whose name occurs in the 1684 plan. More's properties were shared between his four daughters, one of whom married Richard Baker, of Chelmsford. The documents in this bundle give valuable information about other properties that Boyd did not acquire. For example they show that some time between 1721 and 1761 Baker built

the original 'Lion' hotel, Bexleyheath, on part of his wife's inheritance, a field called 'Moat's'. This is the only reference we have to the origin of that hotel.

There was a large increase in the Danson acreage in 1781, 1782, and 1783. First Boyd bought Lady Wood, Noyes of Peases Wood, Round Field and the Four Welling Pieces from John Langton. Then in 1782 he bought most of Hawks Nest Wood in 1783 from Richard Leigh of Wilmington. By these purchases he extended his western boundaries to Westwood Lane and Hook Lane, with some exceptions which were filled by his next purchase. This was the estate originally of the Paine family of East Wickham, one of whom founded Paine's charity for that parish in the reign of Elizabeth I. Ephraim Paine left it to his son George, who got into mortgage difficulties and had to part with it. After various vicissitudes, which are all recorded in the title deeds, it came into the possession of Richard Gough in 1709. He had a plan drawn of it in 1710, which is one of the most interesting items in our collections, especially for its portrayal of Welling Village.

By this purchase Boyd filled the biggest 'hole' remaining in his estate occupied by Nutlands Wood (now occupied by Bexley Grammar School). He also acquired more property near Welling, including Endwell Far and its buildings and some more distant pieces, some of which he sold later. Oddly enough, his very last purchase, in 1791, was of a small field called Hatchet and Helve which we can't identify with certainty. In all these transactions he spent about £11,000 apart from other expenses, such as his Act of Parliament and acquired something over 500 acres. He also brought about great changes in the land he bought. In less than half a century an area which had been largely woodland with just a few little farms hacked out from among the trees was transformed into a huge park, carefully planned and laid out by Capability Brown, the foremost practitioner of the day. It is sad to have to relate that Boyd died with debts of over £39,000 and his family were not able to enjoy the results of his work.