A PULHAM GARDEN REDISCOVERED AT NONINGTON

PETER HOBBS

The Hammond family had lived at Old St Albans Court in Nonington since 1519, substantially adding to and changing this fourteenth-century hall house.[1] William Oxenden Hammond, a successful banker, in 1875 wrote in his MSS 'Family Histories' that he had '... decided to rebuild a new mansion, the old one ... having naturally fallen into a decayed state'. He had already commissioned a new stable block and associated buildings from his friend and architect George Devey[2] and added a tower and a new bay to the south-east side of the existing house. Nevertheless, he now commissioned an entirely new Elizabethan-style mansion on a rise to the north of the old house. He had also been improving and ornamenting the grounds of his newly-inherited estate with substantial tree planting and was no doubt considering other ways of enhancing the attractiveness of his property.

To the south of the old manor house there was a substantial hole in the ground. The first reference found so far to this feature is as a property marker in the 1501 Court Roll of the Abbot of St Albans[3] and it is shown on a 1629 Estate map. Given the ample presence of brickearth as well as recorded brick kilns in the immediate vicinity,[4] it seems reasonable to assume that the 'quarry' was probably extended as the source of raw material in 1556 when the old house was partially rebuilt in brick and it may have been further enlarged in 1666 and 1790 when the mansion was again extended. At the latter time, a large brick-built soakaway was inserted linked by a substantial brick-lined conduit to the rain water drains around the manor house.

This large cavity lay beyond the old roadway leading to the rear of the manor, immediately in front of the new 1869 Stable Block, and adjacent to the Tudor walled garden. This had been remodelled as a parterre with paths and glass houses in 1790 and refurbished, at least in part, in 1869. It was therefore logical for Hammond to utilise the sunken feature for further display and linking it to his walks amongst the rose beds of the Tudor walled garden (**Fig. 1**). No doubt a substantial rockery would have been an obvious idea.

Presumably he would have discussed suitable designers of a sunken rock garden with Devey the best known being James Pulham & Son, based in Broxbourne (Herts.).[5] Devey had executed commissions for the Rothschilds and would have been aware of Pulham's work for Rothschild at Waddesdon Manor.

Rock gardening had developed in the earlier nineteenth century combining the skills of ornamental design with extending scientific enquiry. Some designers preferred to work with natural rock but the Pulhams exploited both this and an artificial (and cheaper) substitute. 'Pulhamite', a stone-coloured terracotta mater-

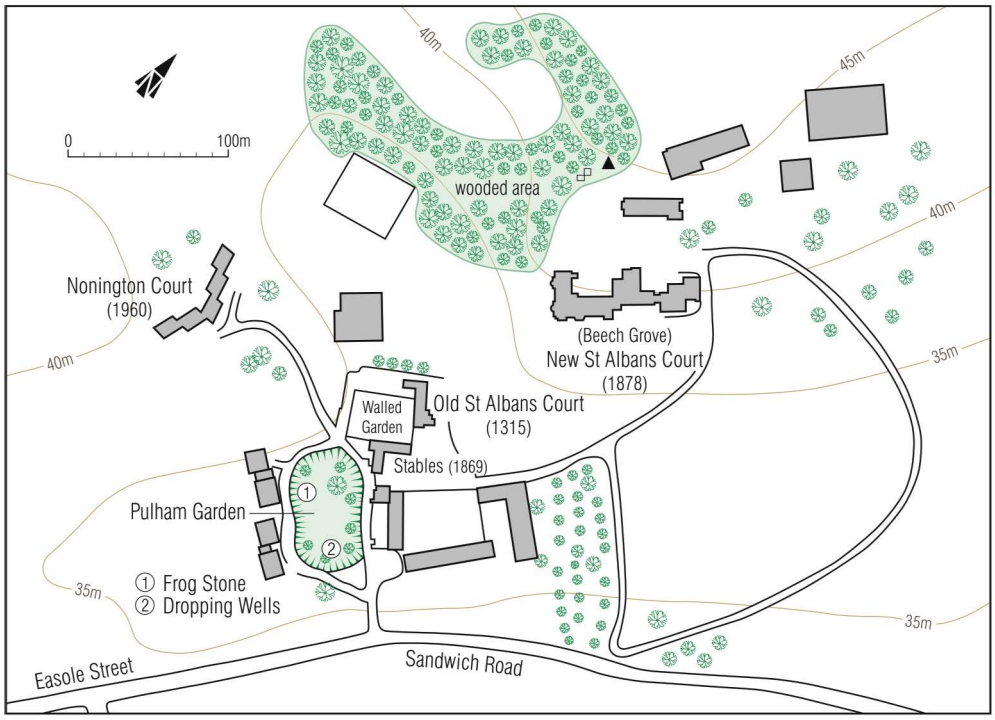

Fig. 1 The setting of the Sunken Garden.

ial used for precast garden or architectural ornamentation was the basis of their reputation. However, Hammond's commission appears to have been for the more expensive natural rock although the formation of a Dropping Well and two associated pools may have used 'Pulhamite'. In the 1877 Pulham Brochure, the work at Nonington was categorised under 'Ferneries, rocky banks, alpineries and conservatories'. The south-west side of the excavation was a shallow slope with rocks amongst grass. Within this were areas linked by steps and paths of stone slabs. There was a prominent Toad or Frog stone to the west with small round planting holes appropriately placed to add to the illusion and another overlooking one of the Dropping Wells. The Pulham Business Records show the work being carried out for Hammond in 1877, a year before he was able to move into his new mansion, so this represented but one strand of a substantial construction project.

According to local accounts of the time, the natural rock came by rail to Adisham, then the nearest station, and by horse and cart the three miles to Nonington. The Wealden sandstone most probably came from a Maidstone quarry, likely the nearest available with rail connections. The water for the Dropping Well came via a two-inch cast iron pipe from a reservoir in the then kitchen gardens to the south-east.

The subsequent history of the sunken garden is unclear. In the 1920s Mrs Ina Hammond lavished care and attention on what her grandchildren knew as Grannie's Garden. There are some grainy photos of small conifer planting in sites where

there are now large trees and there are local recollections of children opening the sluice in the old kitchen gardens and watch the water surge out of the Dropping Well in the sunken garden. The 1937 Sales catalogue describes the area as 'Large Sunk Garden with wide grass slope in centre and dripping well sheltered by large beech and chestnut trees ... '.[6]

Mrs Hammond sold that part of the estate to the English Gymnastics Society, and post-war photos show female students of Nonington College[7] engaged in dramatic performance under the 'frog' stone. The College built four staff bungalows adjacent to the sunken garden, now re-named the 'Dell'. This radically changed the sunken garden's character by closing it in and the steady spread of the yew and conifer trees began to cut down the light and started to drive out the grass sward. The College closed in 1988 and the garden was abandoned to nature.

Re-discovery

In 2000 the present owners of Old St Albans Court took possession of the staff bungalows and their grounds. The first inkling of what had really been acquired came in 2008 when the postman delivered a letter from English Heritage (addressed to Mrs Hammond) concerning Pulham and the data base they were building of the firm's work.[8] By then, the sunken area had been opened up, cleared and made safe, in so doing revealing the mixture of rubble and brick used to underpin the rocks. Rain and animal activity had largely emptied the mixture of peat and soil which had provided planting pockets in the rocks. A rectangular concrete pit was unearthed close to the Dropping Well which was still functioning as a marsh garden but the materials here look different from those used in the other constructions and may be Pulhamite. No water source was detected during the excavations. Paths and steps were mostly in situ although slipped and eroded in some places by tree roots, rabbit activity and weather but the plan of the nineteenth-century construction remained clear.

A detailed survey was carried out in 2013 which shows all the major features of the sunken rock garden (see **Figs 2 and 3**).[9] This showed up brick crescents and banks on the west side. All were formed of the same machine brick, most probably from the Sittingbourne brickfields, and their siting in conjunction with, and under, rock makes the case for them to be part of the original construction. The Japanese knotweed has (hopefully) been exterminated by a sustained programme of digging, burning and poisoning, and the bracken has been tackled similarly. The Dropping Well has been linked to a permanent water supply from a cistern installed by the College in the 1950s to service the Caretaker's cottage. The water from the Dropping Well flows to a small pond and from there by gravity into the 1790 sump now converted to a large cistern from which it is pumped into Devey's cistern in the Stable Yard for garden use. The rediscovered pool has been repaired and linked into the same system. Puzzlingly, no evidence of any link or drain to the large brick 1790 soakaway was found although the soakaway itself is shown on the 25in. Ordnance Survey (1872).

The overgrown yews which overshadow the garden are being steadily trimmed back to allow light again and a replanting programme commenced. Grass snakes as well as a multitude of frogs, newts and other pond life multiply and even adders

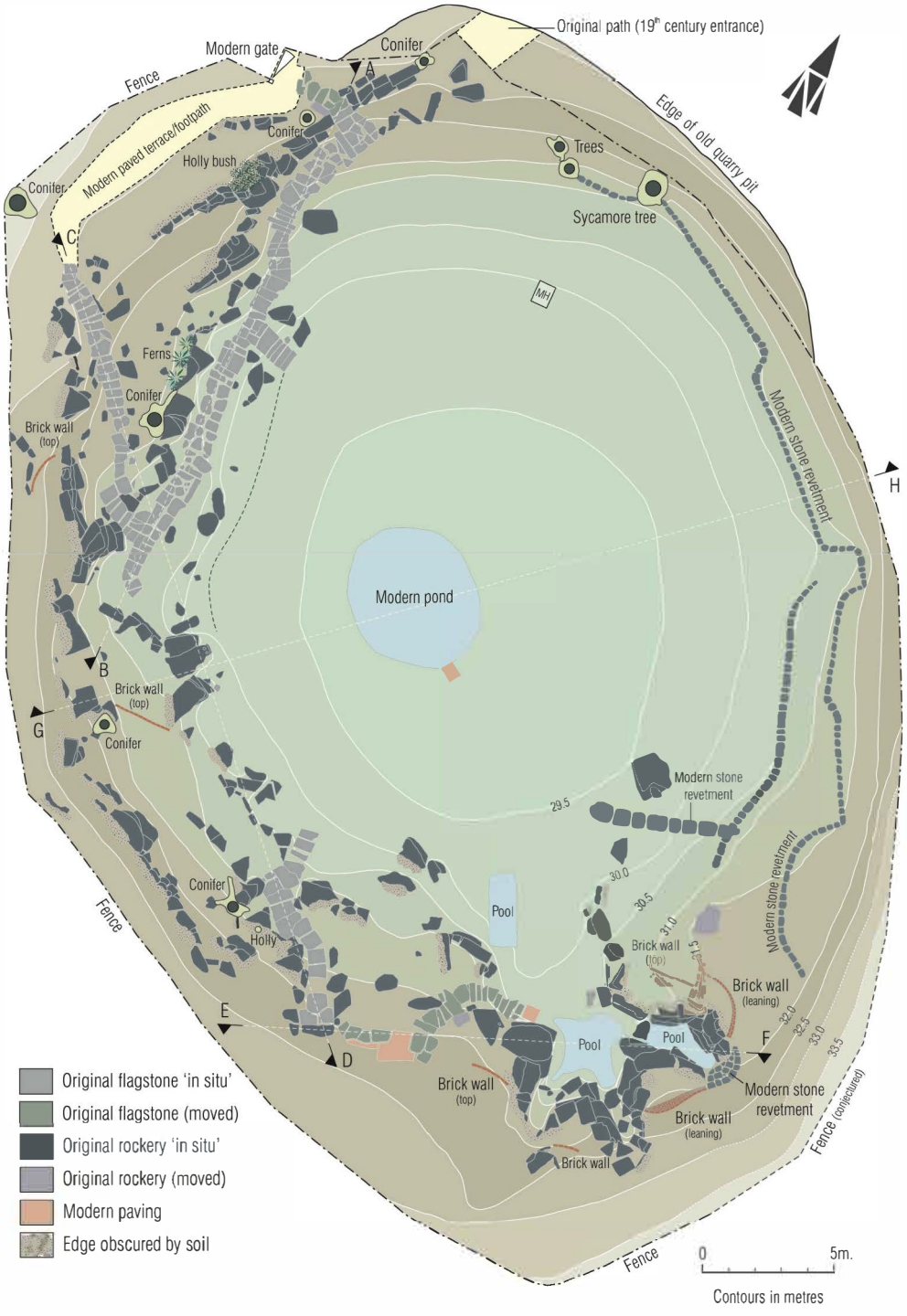

Fig. 2 Plan of the Sunken Garden (aka The Dell) at Old St Albans Court, Nonington.

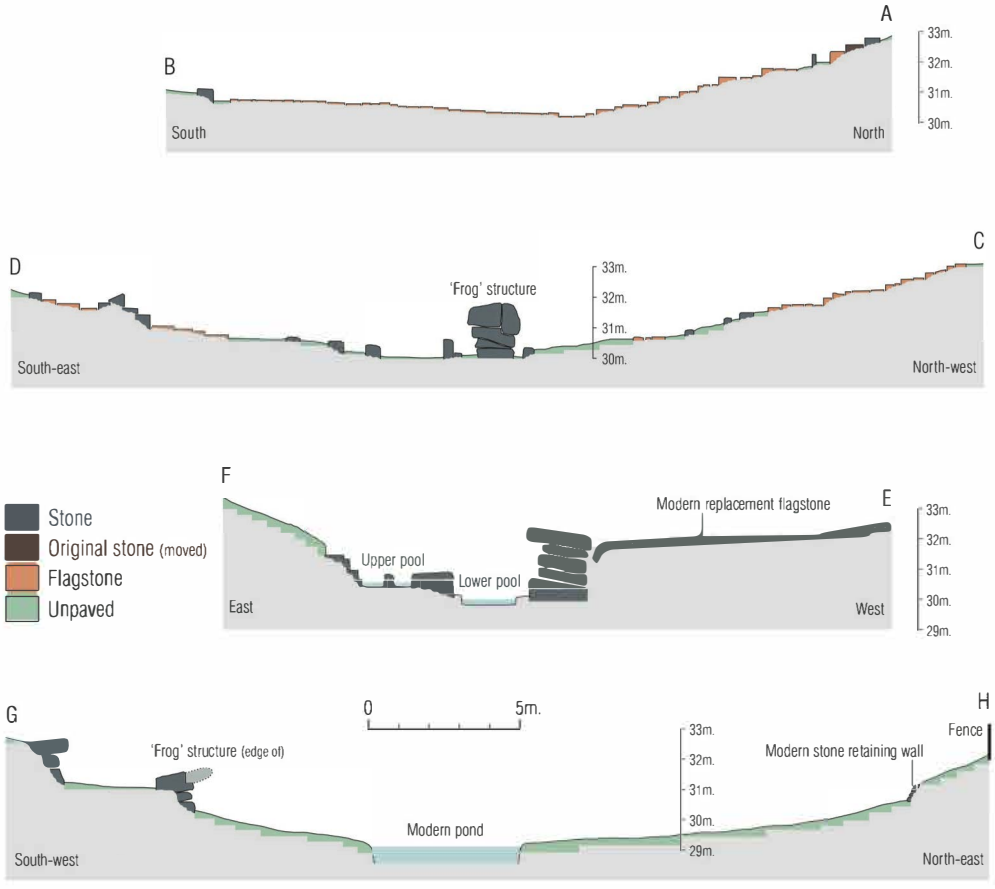

Fig. 3 Profiles of the Sunken Garden at Old St Albans Court (see Fig. 2 showing positions of A-B, etc.).

have been sighted again whilst birds flourish. The original planting would, of course, have been Victorian. A detailed survey was carried out by Richard and Mary Hoskins in 2012-2013 (see **Appendix 1**).

In conclusion, although the basic content and materials of the Pulham execution remain, the nature of the garden has changed from being a substantial excavation but fully open with a slope upwards to the south to one which is now contained on all sides by walls of rock and greenery to the point that it has acquired an air of secrecy because its presence is completely obscured until the entrance gate is opened. Not perhaps William Oxenden Hammond's idea of a garden but one with which certainly the later Pulhams would have been well pleased.

A Gazetteer of Pulham sites in Kent is provided at **Appendix 2**.

ENDNOTES

1 E. Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, 2nd edn, ix (1797-1801), 251-262; P. Hobbs, 2005, 'Old St Albans Court, Nonington', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, cxxv, 273-90.

2 J. Allibone, 1991, *George Devey, Architect, 1828-1886*; British Architectural Library, Geo Devey 125, 56-57.

3 The Abbey of St Albans (Herts.), owners of the ancient Saxon estate since 1097.

4 G. Daws and P. Hobbs, 2015, 'The variety of brick types and sizes used at Old St Albans Court, Nonington', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, cxxxvi, 281-92.

5 Durability Guaranteed – Pulhamite Rockwork – its Conservation and Repair; English Heritage 2008, Appendix A; A Gazetteer of Pulham sites.

6 As far as can be seen from the photograph in the Sale Catalogue; John D. Woods Co. Residential and agricultural Estate of St Albans Court, Nonington, 1938, 24.

7 J.A. Chapman and J.M. Whittles (eds), 2004, *Nonington College, Kent, England 1938-1986*.

8 See endnote 5.

9 This very substantial piece of work was organised by Richard Hoskins aided by Graham Hartley, Les Moorman, Donna Lambert, Barry Sheridan and Marie- Charlotte Wahl. This may be the only Pulham garden which has ever been professionally surveyed.

Appendix 1

THE PLANTS IN THE DELL, ST ALBAN'S COURT, NONINGTON

By Richard and Mary Hoskins

The first known reference to the rock garden at St Alban's Court, Nonington appears in a promotional booklet published *circa* 1877 by James Pulham II (Pulham, *c.*1877). Pulham lists '… a few of the most choice, hardy plants, shrubs, conifers, and flowers … I find that many want to know what plants are most suitable … not for professional and experienced gardeners'. This list of trees, shrubs, ferns, climbers and herbaceous plants is quite comprehensive and includes more than 400 named species or varieties as well as referring more broadly to families of plant used in gardens designed by the Pulham family. Each Pulham garden would have included a selection from this list, varying in number according to the size of the garden. The rock garden at Nonington, now known as 'The Dell', is not large and the selection of plants would therefore have been relatively modest.

A general survey of the plants currently growing in The Dell was carried out during several visits during 2012 and 2013. Seventy-five species of plant were identified and listed during these visits (see below), excluding known recent additions. Comparing these with Pulham's list produced 30 matches of plant species or families.

After more than 140 years a low number of matches would not be surprising, especially as the garden went through a 60-year period of neglect during the 20th century, so at first sight 30 matches seems quite a high number. Included in this total are seven species of large tree including three varieties of yew, Common Yew (*Taxus baccata*), Golden Yew (*Taxus aurea*) and Irish Yew (*Taxus fastigiata*)), two of Cypress (*Cupressus lawsonii* and one other), one of Spruce (*Picea*) and one of Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*). Yew is slow growing and it is quite possible that the three species were all introduced by Pulham. Cypresses grow relatively quickly and

if these species were planted at Nonington by Pulham it is perhaps more likely that the existing trees are descendents of the originals. On the other hand the Spruce (probably *Picea abies* or Norway Spruce) is a large tree that is prominent in photographs of the Dell taken in the 1960s, so might therefore be original. The Pulham plant list includes variegated hollies and dwarf rock holly but does not specifically mention Common Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), of which several mature specimens are now found in the Dell.

There are four species of smaller tree, or shrub, common to both lists. These are: Spotted Laurel (*Aucuba japonica variegate*), Deutzia (probably *Deutzia crenata*), Elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and Common Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*). The last two are species which occur locally in the wild and are immature specimens which have probably been introduced recently and naturally.

Any rock garden worthy of the description would be incomplete without a selection of ferns. All five species of fern now growing in the Dell are found on Pulham's list. These are Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*), Hartstongue Fern (*Asplenium scolopendrium*), Common Polypody (*Polypodium vulgare*), Prickly Shield Fern (*Polystichum aculeatum*) and Male Fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*). Most of these ferns grow locally in the wild but it is very likely that all were included as part of the range introduced into the Dell by Pulham. Of particular note is the Royal Fern which has now become rare in Britain as a result of wetland drainage but survives in profusion in the Dell.

Pulham includes a separate list of climbing or trailing plants 'Suitable to grow up, or trail down, especially over the thick strata of the rocks'. Remarkably few different climbers or trailers survive in the Dell. Of those which do by far the most abundant is Ivy. Pulham recommends obtaining ivies, including 'very good small Ivies … from the banks and hedges, growing wild', and there is no reason to suppose that the ivies in the Dell did not arrive in this way, as most appear to be Common Ivy (*Hedera helix*). One patch of Ivy has exceptionally large leaves – up to 20cm in length – and may represent a less common variety. Of the other climbing or trailing species currently found in the Dell three, Rock Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster horizontalis*), Pheasant Berry (*Leycesteria Formosa*) and Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) are all included in the Pulham list but all could easily have been introduced naturally.

The remainder of the plants currently growing in the Dell consist of at least 46 different species of flowering herbaceous plant, of which eleven are also included in the Pulham Plant List. Some of these are common species of locally found wild flowers such as Bugle (*Ajuga reptans*), Wild Arum (*Arum maculatum*), Ground Ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*), Primrose (*Primula vulgaris*), and Dog Violet (*Viola riviniana*). Two others, Common Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) and Babies Tears (*Soleirolia solierolii)* are species that were introduced to Britain as garden plants during the nineteenth century and have since become notorious invasive plants; these may therefore be remnants of Pulham's original planting. Four further flowering plants may also be descendants of the Pulham planting: Acanthus (*Acanthus montanus*), Autumn Cyclamen (*Cyclamen coum)*, Small-leaved Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) and Shining Crane's Bill (*Geranium lucidum*). The last-named is widespread in the Dell with its striking, bright pink flowers and dark green, glossy leaves.

There are several plants that grow prolifically in the Dell but which are not named in the Pulham list. Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*) is an uncommon wild flower of the local Kentish woodland which is also often grown as a garden plant, flowering in the early spring. Yellow Archangel (*Lamiastrum galeobdolon*) is another wild plant also common in gardens, the species growing in the Dell being the silver-leaved variety. Finally, a very striking plant in the Dell is Indian Rhubarb (*Darmera Peltata*), a native of North America which grows as thick, spreading rhizomes in the wet and boggy areas at the bottom of the Dell and produces metre-tall inflorescences of five-petalled bright pink flowers in late spring. These are followed by even taller stems bearing large, round, green leaves that give the plant its common name and which turn deep red in the autumn. Despite their absence from his list it would not be surprising if Pulham had introduced one or more of these three plants to the Dell.

In conclusion, the 30 species of plant currently growing in the Dell that are also included in the Pulham list of *c.*1877 are unlikely to be all original Pulham plants or even direct descendants thereof. It is probable that most of the smaller shrubs and herbaceous plants have not survived to the present day and that similar species have been planted and re-planted since then. Some of the original conifers may well have survived, together with a handful of ferns, a few shrubs and climbers, and a small number of the more tenacious flowering plants. Apart from these few remaining plants the Pulham legacy is contained in the rockery itself which remains as an oasis of 19th-century gardening endeavour which can still be appreciated in the 21st century.

Pulham, James, c.1877, *Picturesque Ferneries and Rock-Garden Scenery, in Waterfalls, Rockystreams, Cascades, Dropping Wells, Heatheries, Caves or Cavernous Recesses for Boathouses, &c, &c.*, Broxbourne and Brixton: James Pulham & Son (Lindley Library, RHS).

Appendix 2

CHRONOLOGICAL GAZETTEER OF PULHAM SITES IN KENT

(There are other unidentified sites in the County known only by name of town or customer.)

Date	*Town/Village*	*Site or Owner, Contractor*	*Comments*
1854-6	Tun. Wells	Broomhill	Rocky pass and banks
1860	Tun. Wells	F. Wilson	Fernery, cliff to bank
1862-4	Tun. Wells	Dunorlan Park	Substantial works*
1865-70	Bromley	Civic Centre	Some rockwork*
1866	W. Wickham	J. Stewart	Fernery
1867	Bickley	J. Batten	Fernery
1867-9	Gravesend	Rosherville Gardens	Cavern with dropping well
1868-80	Lamberhurst	Court Lodge	Substantial works
1870	Staplehurst	Staplehurst Hall	Rocks on lake margin
1870	Canterbury	Barham Court	Dropping well and pool
1870s	Yalding	Roydon Hall	Fernery and dropping well
1873-4	Bromley	Sundridge Park	Chasm, fernery, cliff*
1874-5	Goudhurst	J. Ridgway	Fernery
1875	Maidstone	Preston Hall	
1876	Bromley	Downham	Fernery
1877	Nonington	St Albans Court	Fernery and rocky banks
1894	Ramsgate	Madeira Walk	Substantial works*
1897	Rochester	Beechy Lees	Rock works
1910	Folkestone	Lower Leas	Caves*
1912	Bexley	Marl House	Water and rock garden
1914	Bromley	Penchullee	
1920-21	Folkestone	The Leas	Substantial works*
1923-36	Ramsgate	St Lawrence Westcliff Winterstoke Gardens	Substantial works*
?	Harrietsham	Colesdane	

*Viewable today.

Sources:

C. Hitching, 2012, *Rock Landcapes, the Pulham Legacy*, Garden Arts Press.
English Heritage, 2008, *Durability Guaranteed. Pulhamite Rockwork – its Conservation and Repair*, Appendix A.