

What is the Mound For?

For more than thirty years I have been the keeper of a historic monument which I have never understood. The main lawn of my Oxford college, New College, is dominated by a big man-made Mound. When I took over the gardens its back slope was adorned with random stone steps which an elderly don told me were there to allow 'rear access'. In the early 1990s a gift from the noted British historian Kenneth Rose allowed us to clear the jungly undergrowth and install a stone staircase up the front slope instead. When we cleared out the jungle, articles in the London press accused us of ruining the long-valued cover for undergraduates' love life. Even a senior economist was said to have used it to test the laws of supply and demand.

The Mound was certainly not built to be a Venus mound. Various dates for its construction have been proposed, including a beginning in 1529 and an end in 1649. Guides like to retell them as evidence of the singular speed at which an Oxford college moves. Nowadays, the undergraduates drink on the platform on the Mound's top, but I doubt if they do much more as the rear is now covered in evergreen choisya and the sides are often brambly.

What, though, was the first purpose of this famous earthwork, some thirty feet high and more than sixty feet wide? I inherited the tradition that it was a viewing platform for nature and nurture below. Once, in front of it stood four beds in which clipped evergreens showed the arms of the King and the motto of the then-male College: 'Manners Makyth Man.' Nowadays, there is only a lawn for the College's triennial Ball. From the rear the view is across wild nature, the park of nearby Magdalen College, the home of young George Osborne, William Hague and the Health secretary Jeremy Hunt. They have no idea what I saw them all doing in their wild years before they imposed University fees on their successors.

In the *Journal of Garden History* for 2012, Dr Karin Seeber has now given the history of our much-visited Mound a new twist. After scrutiny of the evidence she has related it to the Civil War of the 1640s in which Oxford was to play an important part. I have always thought that I have been looking after a charming pastoral fantasy. In her brilliant view, I have been tending a military monument with strongly royal connections. The Mound, she suggests, was built up as a 'symbolic viewpoint' for the cause of the beleaguered King Charles I. Its main construction belonged on the eve of civil war in the early 1640s. The mastermind behind it, she believes, was the head of the College, Warden Robert Pinck.

I have not met Dr Seeber but she has sent me back to the College sources to see what I and my colleagues might add. Correctly she has refuted 1529 as the date for the Mound's beginning. The entry in that year's accounts had been misread. However, as she notes, there was a Mound in progress in 1594 and so Oxford's traditional rate of progress still holds good. No less than £3 was spent on it in that year. I calculate that the rate for a College gardener on Mound business was 8 old pennies per day. The sum bought about 90 man-days of College work. Whatever were the dons trying to do?

By 1590 man-made mounds were well known in garden history. They had begun near the walls of grand Italian gardens where they gave views out and down onto surrounding nature. One such mound can still be seen at the fine Villa Medici in Rome. They then came out into the centre of lawns with more confidence. There was a royal

mound at Hampton Court in the 1520s and plenty of mounds in English gardens by 1600. One of the most touching survives at Cranborne Manor in Dorset where it is linked to John Tradescant, the famous gardener for the Cecil family.

In 1616 our accounts show that another £5 was specially voted for the 'making up', significantly, 'of ye Mount.' Obviously there was already a clear plan for a decent Mound. More work was entered in 1622-3. In early summer 1634, plenty of Mound- days were paid for too.

Dr Seeber observes that garden Mounds were sometimes named Parnassus in honour of the mountain of the classical Muses. In 1615 a big Parnassus Mound was commissioned at Richmond for young Prince Henry. Seeber considers that New College did not have a Parnassus despite the poetic associations which would suit College life. The winged horse Pegasus flew on Parnassus but she can find not 'so much as a Pegasus wing' in contemporary references. Instead she looks to the College Head, or Warden from 1617 onwards. She credits him, Warden Pinck, with a grand new vision for the College garden. He planned, she thinks, to link its flowerbeds to the royal family. In the early 1640s he then ordered its mini-mound to be vastly enlarged. He wanted to turn it into a lookout post for the imminent Civil War.

Thanks to her splendid theory I have been back to look at the Accounts for 1641-2. In spring and summer there was indeed unprecedented expense on our slow-moving Mound. As much as £27 10s was spent on it, more than 700 man days at the College rate. Dr Seeber remarks that the obsequious Pinck was a firm supporter of the King. In the spring of 1642 he even drilled 300 scholars and students in the quads of Christ Church so that they could fight for the royal cause. By November 1642 'bullets and gunpowder' had been stockpiled in our College's holy cloisters. A cannon had been mounted on Magdalen College's beautiful bell-tower and artillery had moved into its Deer Park. In Seeber's view Pinck ordered huge earthworks in our garden to make the Mound into a Royalist symbol. It was to survey the royal crest while serving as a look-out point for battles in Oxford's outskirts.

Mercifully, there is more to be added to her story. In the late 1630s a manuscript, recently re-read, describes the visit to Oxford of one of Dr Seeber's fellow Germans. In New College, we learn, he was specially shown the Mount, or 'berg'. It was a mount called, no less, 'Parnassus'. My predecessors were not so philistine or purely military. Before any Civil War they already had a significant Mound of the Muses. Perhaps they had been encouraged in 1616 by the plans for the one at Richmond. In 1642 they merely built it up on an even greater scale. They nearly finished what had already taken them 50 years. They were never 'changing the guard at Mount Parnassus'. At best they enlarged it into a military viewing point, but it might all be a coincidence. Certainly most of what we still admire was not built for a fight for King and country.

A year later Warden Pinck was imprisoned. Five years later he met a fine academic death by falling down his own staircase. Long experience of College politics makes me doubt that the flurry of Mound-work was driven by his own vision. Usually, a Warden's visions are ably delayed by the College Fellows. Thanks to the testimony of a German traveller, we can live happily with a Mound of the Muses, briefly militarized and later romanticized. Before we built the recent staircase, archaeologists had to excavate the site. They found clay pipes and beer mugs from the late 1640s. The Mound was finished

off in 1648-9 just when the King was executed. Across the centuries, some uses of garden space, at least, never change.

Robin Lane Fox
Garden Fellow

(A version of this note was published in *The Daily Telegraph*; the German traveller mentioned is Georg Christoph Stirn, for whom see in the second issue of New College Notes 'Early Science in New College I: Robert Plot on New College (1677)'; his manuscript diary is now Bodleian, MS Adds. B 67.)