

A New Glasshouse for Stoke Park, Stoke Bruerne, 1895

In the October 2004 issue of the NGT Newsletter, the late Suzanne Wright wrote an article on William Batchelor, the head-gardener at Stoke Park. The article was based on an interview by a correspondent from the magazine *Garden Life* for April 1905, who visited and walked around the pleasure grounds and the kitchen garden with Mr Batchelor. The interview referred to a greenhouse by Foster and Pearson filled with tomato plants and a second house used for flowers.

This present article 'revisits' Stoke Park and concentrates on a new glasshouse by Messenger and Co., possibly the second one noted above, and ordered by William Batchelor in 1895 on behalf of the owner, Bertie Wentworth Vernon.

In 1893, Mr Batchelor had arranged for a Messenger greenhouse to be installed at Harefield Park, Uxbridge, another Wentworth Vernon estate where Batchelor was also responsible for the gardens. This must have been a success because in early February 1895 Messenger's received a request for quotation for a new greenhouse at Stoke Park. What follows is a detailed account of the whole process from initial enquiry through to completion of all on-site work and payment for the new greenhouse based largely on information held in the Messenger archive at Reading University [Information kindly provided by Elizabeth Taylor who has photographed much of the material relating to Messenger's Northamptonshire customers from their Archive at Reading University. The Messenger reference for the purchase of the Stoke Park glasshouse in 1895 is MERL Ref. TR MES AD1/1203].

The Messenger estimate for the work, dated 11th February 1895, was £178 5s 0d broken down into Structure £97 13s 0d; Staging [a raised table running along the axis of the house supported on iron legs] £10 17s 0d; Wiring [galvanised wires £3 18s 0d; Heating £58 6s 0d; and Iron Walk [A perforated cast iron plate set over the heating pipe channel to allow warm air to enter the house] £7 11s 0d. The work was described as follows:

Glasshouses to be erected at Stoke Bruerne, exclusive of bricklayers work, potting shed door in back wall & planks etc. used while our men are erecting. Wood thoroughly well-seasoned red deal, roof glazing 21 oz. British Sheet, upright work 15 oz. ditto, painting four coats of genuine white lead & oil. P.S. Boiler included is of sufficient power to heat about 50 ft. of additional piping to that shown on our plans to be in readiness for future glass erection.

Batchelor, who incidentally received a 2 ½% commission from Messenger's, accepted by letter on the 21st,

I have laid your Estimate & Plans before B W Vernon Esq which he is pleased to accept. Will you Please Put the works in hand at once and let me know about the time it will take to complete the Works.

Followed by a second letter from Vernon

Sir, I hope you will put the work in hand at once and let me have it at your earliest. B Wentworth Vernon.

An internal memo, dated February 26th, from Messenger at Old Broad Street, London to the Works at Loughborough noted that the estimate had been accepted and that,

The houses are to join to an existing range. It will be necessary for you to send someone over to take full particulars.

A flurry of activity ensued as Messenger's prepared handwritten lists of glass with quantities and dimensions for Roof, Top Vents etc., a list of items supplied relating to the boiler and heating system, paint and materials (e.g. 2 cwt of putty, 750 ft. of Vine wire), and a list of brass fittings, nails and screws. The boiler was ordered from Robert Jenkins & Co. of Rotherham with the instruction 'to be sent by rail to Roade Station'.

By the 1st of April Charles Tew, a builder living in Stoke Bruerne village, sent a letter to Mr Messenger telling him that the brickwork base for the greenhouse will be ready by Monday next (April 8th). On the 9th he sent another letter saying,

I have carted Material from Towcester Station to Stoke Park ready for your convenience.

From the weekly timesheets we know that W.H. Bird and T. Dawkins started work at Stoke Park on Saturday the 13th of April, having finished a job the day before at a Major A. Cookson house, Leighton Buzzard, Beds. The time sheets show that they consistently worked 12 hour weekdays, 10 hours on Saturdays with no work on Sundays. There was space on the back of the time sheet for cash claimed for bills, travelling expenses and presumably accommodation; each man regularly claimed 30s per week.

By the following Thursday (April 18th), the first problem occurred when it was realised that some key parts were missing, namely, one piece of angle iron, and the balance weights for the top vents. These were posted to Stoke Park on the 20th but two days later further snags had arisen, the first to do with matching up the rafters with those of the existing house. A more serious concern was related by Bird in a letter,

I cannot understand the connecting rod sent for the vinery top vent. If I put it on the back wall the walk is four feet from it so they would have to get on the border to open it and if I put it on the door jamb it cuts right across the end.

In this letter he included a sketch of his proposed solution to the problem using a 'bell-crank' fitted to the door jamb, which seems to have been accepted. By the 24th of April a further letter was sent to the factory, this time by Mr Hancock, another Messenger workman who had travelled from Leighton Buzzard to Towcester two days earlier after time spent packing the empties at Cookson's. He realised that they had received only 17 foot of lead for flashing and needed 60 foot or more to complete the lead work for the vinery, the plant house and to make good the old house. Hancock confirmed by letter on the 30th that they had managed to come up with a solution. By the next day, J. Fewkes, another Messenger workman sent from the factory, purchased seven panes of 21 oz. glass from Smith Brothers, a local wholesale dealer in building materials, probably replacements for damaged panes.

The work was now being brought to a conclusion. On Friday the 3rd of May Hancock's time was spent on flashing and making good the old house. By the following Friday Hancock and Fewkes were busy packing empties before travelling from Roade back to Loughborough, Hancock having earlier in the week confirmed in a letter that they expected to be finished by

Friday, and requesting instructions, consignment notes and labels to return any surplus materials. Concerning any outstanding work, he added,

In regards to the coping on the [back] wall the bricklayer informs me that he will be unable to get it done before we finish here as he is busy with other work but I have left him instructions as regards the fillet of cement but he says he will do it at the first opportunity & see that a good job is made of it & perfectly watertight.

Also during that last week two new workmen, Messr's Harriman and Miles had been sent to help, recording on their timesheet,

We have had to work overtime to keep the Bricklayers on or we could not have finished this week. Please send instructions. We shall finish this week.

Despite all their confidence they did not in fact finish until Saturday the 18th May, their expenses noted that the railway fare from Roade to Loughborough was 5s 6d each.

This might have been the end of the story but there was additional material contained within the Messenger archive. On the 25th of May just one week after the completion of the above work, a new head gardener, James Dymock had been engaged [under Batchelor we assume], and was writing to Messengers requesting additional work to be carried out,

Having been engaged as Head Gardener I find you have erected a vinery & greenhouse. The vinery I find has not enough piping in it & I have been instructed by Mr Vernon to communicate with you about it with a view of having more put in. There is also a potting shed in course of erection & there is to be some piping put into it also so that both can be done at the same time. I will expect to hear further from you.

Two days later Messengers were preparing a handwritten draft estimate,

B W Vernon Stoke Bruerne Park, Towcester, per Mr James Dymock. Roade Station. Adding two 4" pipes along front of Vinery. £10 0 0. 12 June 2nd Estimate 2 pipes all round front border in addition to present ones + 2 pipes in potting shed. £21 1 0.

On the 11th of June, Dymock concerned about delays wrote,

In reply to your letter of May 27th about the extra piping required in the Vinery I would like if you would now furnish me with a price for to exactly put as much piping into the Vinery as what it already contains including 2 more vapour troughs. The length of the pipes for the potting shed will be 25 ft. one flow & one return of course you will have to allow for fittings whatever you may require trusting to have from you now by return as I am anxious to have the vines planted as soon as possible. P.S. of course I will expect the same size pipes as those already supplied.

Messenger responded promptly and on the 13th Dymock replied,

I am in receipt of the 12th Inst. & beg to say that I wish the work gone on with at once so if you will let me know when the materials will be at Roade Station I will make arrangements for to have it taken out here. I am in a hurry to have it done at once so if you could see your way to comply with my request you would much obliged.

Next day, the factory quickly put together a detailed, handwritten list of pipes, castings, bends and other fittings marked in red at the top of the sheet 'To go to Day'. Work began on site on the 18th of June; this time Messrs Phillips and Sherwin undertaking the installation, again working 12 hours on weekdays but only seven hours on Saturdays. Their timesheet for week ending Saturday was annotated,

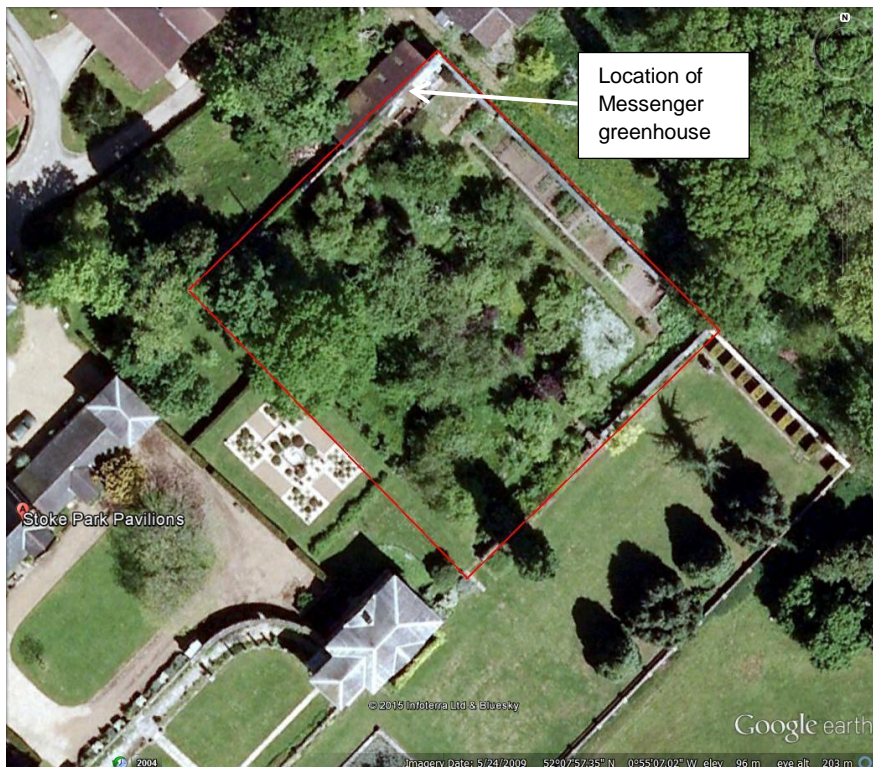
2 extra Bends & two Joints send for by Telegram [on the 19th] are extra to fixing pipes on the other side of Potting shed to where shown on plans. Telegram 7d. Carriage paid by Mr Vernon.

There being no other timesheets in the archive it must be assumed that the work was completed within the week. The final bill dated 1st of July 1895, for both pieces of work was £202 6s 0d,

Bill for fixing glasshouses on 11 Feb/95. Wood stages, galvanised wiring to Vinery roof, heating apparatus and two pipes in potting house on opposite side shown in plan. Carriage paid by Mr Vernon.

Post script. The Messenger greenhouse no longer survives but amazingly, when a survey was carried out at Stoke Park as part of the NGT Walled Kitchen Garden Project, there was sufficient surviving evidence on the ground and walls to be able to estimate the basic dimensions of length, width and height to within 6 inches of those documented in the Messenger archive.

Rod Conlon



Stoke Park . Extent of walled kitchen garden from 1900 OS map, and location of greenhouse against north-west wall.