

# THE ENGLISH LANDSCAPE GARDEN

## THE HA HA AND THE HERMITAGE

### Introduction

The general history of gardens has been written many times over. Some authors choose to take a national approach with sections on ancient Persia, the Italian Renaissance and the gardens of old China, for example (Berrall, J., 1966), or a chronological approach with carefully-selected chapter titles like 'The Nineteenth Century' (Fearnley-Whittingstall, J., 2002). Yet others look at the subject through the lens of a particular theme, such as Jane Brown's 'A Social History of Gardens and Gardening' (1999). They range from academically-minded studies (although the subject is so vast no single volume can do more than provide an overview) to coffee-table picture books. And yet, for those of us with English blood, every one of them can gladden our hearts and make us proud of our nationality, for they all document one extraordinary period in the history of the garden, the 18th century, a time when fashion turned, when Italian, French and Dutch style gardens became passé, and when England, through the landscape movement, took over as the world's leading exponent in garden design - a position she has been reluctant to relinquish ever since.

In this short essay, I hope to describe and explain briefly the English landscape movement, with particular references to two specific gardens, Painshill and Kew. Painshill is a near-perfect example of a garden designed and constructed purely in the landscape style, and therefore provides a useful template to appreciate the beauty and subtleties of such gardens. By contrast, Kew is a good example of a garden which underwent much evolution, before, during and after the 18th century. Moreover, I intend to look more closely at two specific elements of a Landscape Garden - the ha ha and the hermitage. The former can be seen as a technological development, while the latter has interesting symbolic associations.

### Garden history and St George in box

In the Mediterranean sphere, the earliest gardens have been traced back to ancient Egypt. Subsequent great empires - those of the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans - all developed distinctive garden styles, but it wasn't until the Renaissance, when European culture in general was flourishing, that gardens began to flourish too. In the 16th century, Italy led the way; and then France took over as the fashion leader, first by emulating Italian gardens, and then by evolving its own grand style, most obviously at Versailles, in the second half of the 17th century. At this time, a certain style of Dutch garden also became modish, especially where space was limited (the Dutch being past-masters at efficient use of land). In England, the aristocracy copied these continental trends. During the latter years of the 17th century, and the beginning of the 18th century, many rich men would have employed the most eminent garden architects of the time, George London and Henry Wise, to design their controlled formal gardens, complete with geometrically laid out parterres, perhaps with a knot garden or two, topiary, and tree-lined avenues. London and Wise designed, for example, a large parterre de broderie for Hampton Court.

But a cultural storm was brewing in London's literary and artistic circles which was to lead to the most rapid, radical shift in garden design trends the world had ever seen. In 1712, the celebrated poet and classicist, Alexander Pope, published the first two cantos of his mock-epic poem, 'The Rape of the Lock' (which in time would become his most famous work), and a year later, he published a much-quoted essay in the *Guardian* paper satirising current garden fashion, particularly topiary. In a mock catalogue, for example, he offers 'St George in Box; his arm scarce long enough, but will be in a condition to stick the Dragon by next April' (Hunt J. D., Willis, P., eds, 1988). Pope was a man of action as well as letters. He went on to build his own small garden and grotto at Twickenham, and, as an enthusiastic socialite, to spread the Landscape Garden ideas among his many acquaintances.

In 1715, the influential nurseryman, writer and one-time pupil of London and Wise, Stephen Switzer, published 'The Nobleman, Gentleman, and Gardener's Recreation' in which he discussed many of the themes soon to become integral to Landscape Gardens. For instance, he asked this: 'And why is not a level easy walk of gravel or sand shaded over with trees, and running thro' a corn field or pasture ground, as pleasing as the largest walk in the most magnificent garden one can think of?' (Hunt J. D., Willis, P., eds, 1988). Elegant, if sharp, criticism of the formal continental styles, as evinced by Pope's satire, and bold new ideas such as those of Switzer, resonated with other developments in English society, flourishing within a culture liberalism and enlightenment. Of relevance, perhaps, was a growing divergence between French and English thought. This was the period England's premiere scientific institution, the Royal Society, opposed Cartesian a priori theories in favour of more empirical observations and patient investigation which implied a close relationship with nature (Hunt J. D., Willis, P., eds, 1988, p.8). This was the period, after all, when Isaac Newton was presiding over the Royal Society.

### Bridgeman and Kent

Two men stand out as the first practitioners of the new ideas in garden design: Bridgeman and Kent. However, credit should also be given to Horace Walpole who has left us with important contemporaneous and historical accounts of the landscape movement. Like Pope before him, Walpole was a great writer and man of letters with a passion for gardens. According to Walpole, Charles Bridgeman was the 'fashionable successor to London and Wise' (Berrall, J., 1966). As his name coincidentally implies, he created a bridge between the old and the new: he did not banish straight walks and high clipped hedges, but he did plan for diversification, wildernesses and loose groves.

Walpole appears to suggest that Bridgeman invented the ha ha, though this is almost certainly untrue, as is Walpole's explanation for the peculiar name. While still referring to Bridgeman's influence, Walpole says this: 'But the capital stroke . . . was the destruction of walls for boundaries, and the invention of fosses - an attempt then deemed so astonishing, that the common people called them Ha! Ha's! to express their surprise at finding a sudden and unperceived check to their walk.' (Berrall, J., 1966). The importance of the ha ha is simply that it allowed uninterrupted views, from a country house, across the countryside, while, at the same time, creating a barrier to stop animals, such as cattle and sheep, in that countryside from straying across to the flower gardens near the house. Among his achievements, Bridgeman was a Royal Gardener, the last to have sole responsibility for all of the Royal Gardens, a position he achieved in 1727 when George II succeeded as king and the more traditional Wise retired from the position.

William Kent, though, went one stage further than Bridgeman. According to Walpole again, when the fence was sunk and nature was brought into the plan: 'At that moment appeared Kent, painter enough to taste the charms of landscape, bold and opinionative enough to dare and to dictate, and born with a genius to strike out a great system from the twilight of imperfect essays. He leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden.' (Hunt J. D., Willis, P., eds, 1988). While Bridgeman had trained with London and Wise, Kent spent much of his youth in Italy. As a young man, like many others, he went on the Grand Tour, but, unlike most, he returned to Italy and stayed there nine years studying painting and architecture. Then, in the late 1720s, after striking up a friendship with Lord Burlington, Kent returned to England to help Burlington landscape his estate at Chiswick. Kent brought with him an idealised image - absorbed from his work in Italy of copying old masters - of how classical themes could be blended into an English garden. More specifically, the 17th century French painters working in Italy, Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin for example, are often quoted as providing inspiration for English landscapists (Hunt J. D., Willis, P., eds, 1988, p.15).

#### The 'emblematic' period and Painshill

During the next 20 years or so, the Landscape Garden evolved rapidly. Burlington's garden is considered a rather timid attempt at breaking with precedent, but Kent went on to work at Stowe, one of the most famous of all Landscape Gardens, Rousham (the only complete example of Kent's work still surviving) and, with Bridgeman, at Richmond Gardens (later to become part of Kew) where he was responsible for designing the hermitage and Merlin's Cave among other features. The hermitage was so well praised that Pope wrote: 'Every man, and every boy, is writing verses on the Royal Hermitage.' Indeed, a significant part of Bridgeman's work at Richmond was the landscaping of William Kent's follies (Kew Gardens website).

John Dixon Hunt (1971) has labelled this early period of landscape gardening - using natural-looking arenas with carefully arranged elements - 'emblematic'. Typical features of such a garden are the ha ha, invisibly separating the house from its garden, a natural-contoured (or serpentine) lake, vistas of fields and trees, with partially-hidden temples, grottos, hermitages, monuments and other features. Many such gardens would have included a walk or ride, to be taken in a certain direction to best appreciate the beauties and surprises of the garden landscaping. The garden at Painshill was largely the work of its owner, Charles Hamilton (just as another famous landscaped garden, Stourhead, was designed by its owner Henry Hoare) and not that of professional architects and designers. Hamilton created his garden from scratch, starting in the late 1730s, and taking the best part of 40 years. Nevertheless, Painshill - which has been largely restored today as it would have been in the 18th century - provides an excellent, almost an idealised, example of the Landscape Garden as envisaged by Kent and others.

The devised circuit starts by bringing the visitor along the edges of the Mole River, past an embankment of vines, into a circular garden, planted with evergreens, many of which would have been imported. Hamilton was a keen plantsman and, like other landscapers, took advantage of 17th century imports such as Cork Oak (*Quercus suber*) and Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) as well as newer 18th century imports from across the Atlantic, such as the Turkey and Willow Oaks (*Quercus cerris* and *Quercus phellos*) and the Snowdrop Tree (*Halesia carolina*). The walk/ride then leads on, weaving round and across a serpentine lake, past a ruined abbey, a Gothic (or, according to some students, Moorish!) temple, through an elaborate grotto to a mausoleum, the sites where a temple and hermitage would have stood, a Gothic tower, and a Turkish tent. Sometimes, as with the approach to the mausoleum and areas known as the 'Alpine Valley' and 'Elysian Fields', the planting is designed to affect a visitor's mood. And, whereas there are long and wide vistas at different points around along the route, the main emblems are carefully hidden, or only hinted at, thus providing the visitor with a series of surprises and thought-provoking allusions to classical and more recent culture.

While the inspiration and imagination of writers, architects and artists in the liberal Georgian period provided the motor for this major change in garden style, the aristocracy, ever keen to keep up with the latest fashions and keen to impress their peers, also had more practical reasons for turning their estates into landscaped gardens. This was the age of enclosures and land owners were anxious to demonstrate propriety over their property, not least their deer parks: what better way to do this than turn their countryside into their gardens. Another consideration was cost. While both formal and landscape gardens were expensive to build (the latter often requiring large scale earth works, and the building of dams), the former were much more expensive to upkeep (because of the need for constant weeding of the parterres and clipping of the topiary, for example).

#### Brown and Repton

More famous than Bridgeman or even Kent, however, is Lancelot (Capability) Brown, the near ubiquitous garden designer who saw capabilities wherever he was invited to comment on an estate's potential. He was appointed head gardener at Stowe in 1741. In the early 1750s he set up his own independent

practice, providing not only designs but the labour to build them, and, in the 1760s was employed by George III to re-landscape Richmond Gardens (i.e. Kew). Hunt (1971) labels gardens in this era as 'expressive' compared with those from the earlier period he called 'emblematic'. Brown was less interested in features (or emblems), and focused on simpler landscapes with gently undulating lawns, trees, and views of water. At Kew, for example, he removed several of Kent's features (although not the hermitage). Today, however, the only surviving Brownian element at Kew is the Hollow Walk, created in 1773 with laurels, but now known as the Rhododendron Dell (Kew Gardens website). Despite his fame, Brown is also remembered for not allowing the odd cottage, or even village, to hinder his landscape plans. According to Jane Brown (1999), the classic example of this single-mindedness was at Milton Abbas in Dorset, where Lancelot Brown's plans required the moving of a sizeable market town (including a grammar school, almshouses, shops, four inns and a brewery!). Oliver Rackham (1995), an acknowledged authority on the British countryside, calls Brown's style of gardening 'landscape emparking'.

In terms of the fame that history bestows on such men of vision and brilliance, Humphrey Repton became the natural successor to Capability Brown. He was not born until 1752, but, a century after London and Wise, he was the aristocrats' (and up-and-coming aristocrats') garden designer of choice. His style, while considered within the Landscape Garden movement, was neither wholly emblematic or expressive. As a professional designer (and not a builder like Brown), his interest was in pleasing customers, often incorporating existing forms and taking account of the convenience of users far more than his predecessors had done. As such his style might be called 'engaged'. Repton is particularly remembered for the red books, in which he provided before and proposed-after pictures of his client's gardens. In many of his writings, he appears preoccupied with persuading clients that Brown's ideas were not always ideal, as in this passage from 1816 about the ha ha: 'The art of landscape gardening is in no instance more obliged to Mr Brown than for his occasionally judicious introduction of the ha! ha! or sunk fence, by which he united in appearance two surfaces necessary to be kept separate. But this has been in many places absurdly copied to an extent that gives more actual confinement than any visible fence whatever.' (Hunt J. D., Willis, P., eds, 1988).

#### The ha ha and the hermitage

Although the ha ha can be viewed as a technological discovery which allowed Landscape Gardens to develop (in much the same way that many other historically important social and scientific movements were sparked by technical innovations), it was not Bridgeman's invention nor Kent's. A French book by A. D'Argenville, published in 1709 and translated three years later by John James as *'The Theory and Practice of Gardening'*, states this: 'At present we frequently make through-views, called Ah Ah, which are openings in the walls, without grills, to the very level of walks, with a large and deep ditch at the foot of them, lined on both sides to sustain the earth, and prevent the getting over, which surprises the eye on coming near it, and makes one cry Ah! Ah! from whence it takes its name.' (Hunt J. D., Willis, P., eds, 1988). Moreover, a similar French device called the saut de loup (wolf's jump) certainly dates back to the 17th century. And, at Leven's Hall in Cumbria, there is a 1690s Ah Ah still extant (Fearnley-Whittingstall, J., 2002).

While the ha ha was an important practical feature of the Landscape Garden, the hermitage was very much a spiritual emblem, one that expressed, in several ways, a land-owner's wish to associate with nature. According to Edward Harwood (2000), who has published a detailed study of hermits in the 18th century garden, by the 1740s it had become 'virtually de rigueur to include a hermitage among one's garden structures' and that 'it would not be surprising to discover, should a tabulation ever be made, that the hermitage was the most common type of associative garden building, rivalling in sheer numbers even the simplest of classic temples'. Harwood argues that in many cases hermitages were employed by their owners as retreats, for getting back to nature (although there were notable exceptions, such as at Painshill, where Hamilton famously advertised for a hermit, and other cases where automatons were used!). He summarises the point as follows: 'The ability to maintain a hermit was both an assertion of material well-being, and the expression of an apotropaic allegiance to a staunchly anti-materialist system of values.' Also, interestingly, Harwood traces the origins of hermitages and grottos - at times one and the same thing - to long before the 18th century. In the mid-17th century, for example, John Evelyn, an important figure in Restoration period gardening, describes what he calls a grotto, but which, in fact, is more like a hermitage (Harwood, E. S., 2000).

#### Conclusion

Although the origins of the English Landscape Garden have been much written about, and are clearly associated with the first half of the 18th century, especially with the names of Switzer, Bridgeman and Kent, it is equally clear that the imaginative and practical elements of the movement did not arise as suddenly as is sometimes portrayed, nor did they emerge out of nowhere. Switzer and Bridgeman took hold of the 17th century garden and began tinkering with it, while the most inspirational of the trio, Kent, very evidently drew on classical and historic ideas and images. Moreover, key features, such as the ha ha and the hermitage, were thought about and employed long before Burlington's Chiswick Garden, Kent's Kew or Hamilton's Painshill. Nevertheless, for a variety of social, cultural and agricultural reasons, the landscape style took off in the 1730s, and swept through England's landed gentry like a craze. It is thanks also to the great landscape artists, like Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton, who promoted and extended the craze for much of the rest of the 18th century, that the English Landscape Garden came to dominate Europe just as the French and Italian gardens had done for centuries beforehand. Having escaped his box confinement, our patron saint, St George, is surely smiling.

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which contains verbatim extracts of the following:
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