

Flowers in the Landscape

Eighteenth Century Flower Gardens and Floriferous Shrubberies

Papers from the seminar held at Hartwell House in June 2006

The eighteenth century floristic shrubbery and flower garden was elegant and sophisticated. In recent years it has been extracted rather shyly from the shade of its more robust brother the landscape park, and revealed as a far more exciting and dynamic genre than anyone had expected. Our increasingly detailed knowledge of this forgotten and unsuspected garden genre is largely based around the research and insight of two great heroes in the world of Garden History. Both contributed greatly to our seminar.

Mavis Batey is the first of these and is, of course, the doyenne of Garden History. Her lecture centred largely upon the influence of William Mason's poetry on the development of the flower garden at Nuneham Courtenay, the home of Lord Harcourt, the brother of Lady Elizabeth Lee at Hartwell. Her title, "Poet's feeling and Painter's eye", brilliantly summed up the intensely emotional power behind garden and landscape design in the later eighteenth century.

Mark Laird was our keynote speaker. With his encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject, and wonderful watercolours recreating the floristic intentions of the gardeners of the eighteenth century, he provided an unparalleled account of what was possible, what was achieved, and for how long — in these great landscapes that have now so often reverted to a few shades of green, with most other colour now swamped by more aggressive species.

Eric Throssell, Hartwell's most recent architect, guided us around the remains of Lady Elizabeth Lee's Flower Garden. He explained how he came to the conclusion that this site beyond the Triumphal Arch that takes the visitor beneath the road to Lower Hartwell, was the site of the Flower Garden so extraordinarily depicted in the plans held in the Bodleian Library. All the flowerbeds in the plans could be plotted out within the area of the flower garden. They centred on the gardener's cottage, unkindly commandeered by the Lee family in the 1780s as a Summer retreat, and aggrandised with classical columns where the rather more mundane French doors now lead into was had become Lady Elizabeth Lee's parlour.

Mick Thompson, the gardens manager and archivist from Ashridge College gardens described the original development and recent restoration of the Countess of Bridgewater's garden. Still approached by Humphry Repton's souterrain, it has a great central plinth in the middle awaiting the return of (a copy of) the Painshill Bacchus, sold in the 1920s.

Octavia Tulloch talked about her practical experiences at Stowe gardens. She worked on the detailed re-creation of Capability Brown's floristic shrubberies in the Grecian Valley, and demonstrated the need for continual maintenance, pruning, replanting, and moving of the shrubs to maintain the desired effect.

Mike Buffin, Gardens Adviser for the National Trust, described the restoration of the Long Shrubbery at Osterley, with which he is closely involved. This is the subject of a further seminar in 2007, which explores the relationship between gardener and architect in the design of these gardens.

Kath Clark and Karen Bridgman, the two great floristic practitioners from Painshill, explained the re-creation of two of Lady Lee's Hartwell flowerbeds in the walled gardens at Painshill and the appalling workload that these designs engendered. Two gardeners have been maintaining two flowerbeds full time for a year — the results are spectacular, but at terrific cost!

At Nuneham Courtenay we saw the site of William Mason's 1780s flower garden. Beautifully maintained by the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, it has retained the guise of a slightly later garden — with low shrubs replacing a number of the flowers. A very sensible compromise, that produces a gentle and intensely calming landscape — entirely designed for 'Il Penseroso', the Melancholy man.

At Ashridge Mick Thompson guided us around the Countess of Bridgewater's garden in the final stages of restoration to its early C19 form — which will be heavily influenced by what we had all learnt at the seminar.

Rather satisfyingly, Mark Jackman, the Ashridge gardener who undertook the work in the Countess's flower garden, is now Head Gardener for Hartwell and has been uncovering the buried remains of Lady Lee's garden. What goes around, comes around; and a very nice end to the seminar.

The 40 attendees at the seminar included, as intended, a mix of academic and practical backgrounds. Thanks are due to the Ernest Cook Trust for making the attendance of many of the practical gardeners possible by generous sponsorship and to Historic House Hotels for their hospitality. Eighteen of our attendees are professionally engaged in horticulture, and a number on the academic side of the garden fence as well. The resulting dialogue was inspiring.

Richard Wheeler

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