

# Gibbs & Gardening

The work of the Eighteenth-Century Architect James Gibbs  
Papers from the seminar held at Hartwell House in August 2008

## Foreword

The James Gibbs Conference at Hartwell in August 2008 was primarily intended to explore the work of the architect at Hartwell and Stowe, and how the interrelationship between gardening and architecture was bound up in the movement between the formal and natural landscape.

Hartwell's current architect, Eric Throssell is the acknowledged expert on Gibbs's work there, and he as the star batsman was ably assisted by, to follow the metaphor, his runner (and *amanuensis*), Sarah Rutherford, who gave the lecture itself. The intensely formal gardens of the 1730s at Hartwell are of course famously recorded in a series of topographical paintings by that painter of Covent Garden low life, Balthazar Nebot, and these give us a wonderful portrayal of Gibbs's work, animated by the Lee family themselves entertaining Prince Frederick, probably on his way to Stowe, other characters contemplating their own morality seen through the emblematic nature of the statues of Hercules and the satyr Marsyas, and all the time a Greek Chorus of gardeners, all working hard, but each with an eye on the surrounding events. The complexity of the landscape was brilliant, and only matched by Throssell's reconstruction of it in both plan and model; now in the Staircase Hall at Hartwell.\*

The National Trust's Head Curator, David Adshead, set the Gibbsian scene with a workmanlike, informative and compelling narrative on Gibbs's character, politics, life and works, whilst

Alec Cobbe gave a fascinating insight into James Gibbs's work in Ireland at his family home of Newbridge.

Stowe could not be left out and Richard Wheeler put forward the idea that the Eastern gardens at Stowe, while implemented by the Head Gardener and Clerk of Works, one Lancelot Brown, was most likely conceived and planned by James Gibbs, giving a precise geometric skeleton to this, the first piece of expansive natural landscape design in England. This part of the gardens, with its views both in to the Hawkwell Field and out, to the Deer Park, can be seen as the progenitor of all Brown's later work, both in Pleasure Grounds and Parks.

Patrick Eyres travelled down from the North for a cameo performance on Gibbs at Wentworth Castle, where his (Gibbs of course) Tory tendencies led him to provide the iconographic architecture for the fragile alliance between old Tories and new Whig Patriots, in opposition to the dictatorial aberration that they saw in the country's first Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole.

So this great architect straddled the political divide of the time, just as he straddled the change from the formal to the natural landscape design. One is bound to see a connection between the two.

Both Eric Throssell and Patrick Eyres cite Terry Friedman's discussion of Hartwell in his book *James Gibbs*, Yale 1984, as the starting point of their explorations and so we have gratefully included it as our first appendix.

*Richard Wheeler*

\*The article visually demonstrates a link with Gibbs and the Hartwell garden design by comparing four pictorial sources for the various buildings and statuary:

- Details of the buildings and sculpture at Hartwell in their original setting, taken from Nebot's paintings of 1738.
- Illustrations of comparable buildings and structures in Gibbs's

*Book of Architecture* (1728) and other contemporary sources for similar examples.

- Eric Throssell's modern reconstruction drawings of these buildings.
- Photographs of the buildings and sculpture in their current setting, and other contemporary similar examples.

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