

Talking Heads

Garden Statuary in the Eighteenth Century

Papers from the seminar held at Hartwell House in August 2007

INTRODUCTION

Of all places to hold a seminar on garden statuary, Hartwell has to be one of the most appropriate. The statues within this extraordinary garden, probably by the French sculptor Pierre Le Gros, populate the place with messages from the Ancient World taken up with enthusiasm by the Lee family of the C18, and still legible today.

Thanks to Head Gardener, Mark Jackman, and his team, the gardens were looking at their best for Eric Throssell to describe the construction and restoration of the Triumphal Arch and his analysis of Lady Elizabeth Lee's flower garden, whilst Richard Wheeler unravelled the complexities of Sir Thomas and Sir William Lee's iconography.

The Seminar itself ranged widely over the theme beginning with **John Edmondson** of National Museums Liverpool relating the eclectic but connoisseur collecting of Henry Blundell in Lancashire. He set this within the wider context of sculpture collectors of the day and described Blundell's unique display of his trophies both in buildings and in the sylvan surroundings of his garden.

Next **Richard Wheeler** went through a detailed analysis of the meaning of the gardens at Hartwell as expressed through the paintings of Balthazar Nebot, the poetry of Thomas Merrick and the statues themselves.

Jan Clarke followed with the travails (and travels) of the Painshill Bacchus, from Italy to Anglesey Abbey by way of Painshill, Fonthill, Hafod and Ashridge. As a postscript a cast of the statue is now being made at Trevor Proudfoot's workshop at Cliveden and copies are on the way for Anglesey Abbey, Painshill, Hafod and Ashridge. In the words of Alastair Laing, the National Trust's adviser on paintings and sculpture, Bacchus's tours around England will be marked like latter-day Eleanor Crosses around the country.

Tim Knox, Director of the Soane Museum, but formerly Head Curator at the National Trust then looked at the conservation of garden statuary and the perils and pitfalls (and collapses) of these materials, mostly not designed for a wet and frosty British climate. Not everything done in the past has been exemplary and many useful lessons came through Tim's erudition and humour.

Lastly **Richard Wheeler** explored the idea of the Choice of Hercules, between vice and virtue, as expressed in many of the gardens of the C18 in various ways including sculpture. Not surprisingly Stowe, West Wycombe and Stourhead came to the fore in this lecture, but less immediately obvious was the overriding influence of Versailles, with its Via Regia; the straight and narrow path, from which through life we all stray.

In the afternoon the practicalities of the morning were explored in the gardens; from Juno and Jupiter with their associated peacock and eagle, to the lost satyr Marsyas, now only marked by the stone tree to which he was tied, and his one remaining cloven hoof. We were told that his loss could be laid at the door of, as so often, wartime soldiers who vandalised the figure in their usual way. Apparently the daughter of the Head Gardener at the time thought that her father's staff were then instructed to 'bury the devil' as with all treasure in wartime, to be uncovered when more peaceful times returned. It hasn't been seen since...

We have also included the 1737 poem by Alexander Merrick, which so wonderfully evokes the spirit of Hartwell's gardens. It may have been commissioned in the same way as Balthazar Nebot's paintings of the gardens, to record them as they were about to vanish. Although he was probably a Woollen Draper and Mercer based in Aylesbury from about 1718 to 1733, and was probably buried there as a Surveyor of Windows on 24th July 1759, his poem opens up the garden in the most delightful way.

Sarah Rutherford

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