



Towards the Rea

Dr *Timothy Mowl*, Reader in Architectural and Garden History in the History of Art Department, has embarked on the mammoth task of writing a garden history of all the counties in Britain. With *Historic Gardens of Gloucestershire* and *Historic Gardens of Dorset* under his belt, he is well into *Historic Gardens of Wiltshire*. 'That should make me 84 by the time I complete my last county, but who cares!'



Sezincote, Gloucestershire

It was when I was writing *Gentlemen & Players: Gardeners of the English Landscape*, a possible course book for my Garden History MA (Master of Arts) students, that my suspicions about garden history in general began to crystallise. Virtually every book I read seemed to make its conclusions about English gardens and their development over the past 500 years by jumping along a set of traditionally famous garden stepping-stones like Wilton House, Hampton Court, Castle Howard,

Stowe, Stourhead, Painshill and Hestercombe. Furthermore, the reputations of the great garden designers like Lancelot Brown, Humphry Repton, J C Loudon or Edwin Lutyens seemed to be set in stone. For example, in the chapters on William Kent, Horace Walpole's admiring, even unctuous, verdicts were always quoted; but was Kent really the first garden designer who 'leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden', as Walpole claimed?

But was a survey of 1,800 gardens possible? Nikolaus Pevsner's *Buildings of England* series might not be within my reach, but at least it was a beacon, proving that such a compendium was humanly possible.

There was obviously much to find out, and where better to begin than in Gloucestershire – a perfect hunting ground on which my Garden History students could make their field trips? So, with Pevsnerian hankerings, I began

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Then there was the actual head count of influential gardens. How many gardens had to be taken into account in the average county before one could come to a critical conclusion on any supposed stylistic trend? The answer in Gloucestershire alone seemed to be at least 50 of some significance. With 36 counties in England, it suggested that a true garden history should be based on no less than 1,800 gardens, rather than just a few over-trodden stepping-stones like Stourhead and Castle Howard.

on our fabulously garden-rich three-part county – Cotswolds, Vale and Forest of Dean. Apart from getting married, that was probably the most rewarding decision I have ever made.

The garden hunt is extremely enjoyable and, academically speaking, prodigiously rewarding. Already I have made a few resounding discoveries – the real author for that light-hearted Gothick waterfall temple in Dodington Park and the true architect for the Palladian Bridge at Wilton House. These are →

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→ incidental, although personally exciting for me. What is emerging is what I had begun to suspect – that the real garden history of England has yet to be written and, while I may not live long enough to write it, at least my students and I, together with the Department of Archaeology, with whom History of Art works so profitably, are laying the foundations. As in Robert Browning's poem 'The Grammarian's Funeral', the basic grammar has to be got right before the treasures of Greek and Latin literature can become readily accessible. We are establishing the true English garden grammar.

Each county, we find, has its own individual garden profile, its times of rich profusion, its odd vacancies, its idiosyncratic ways of dealing with a prevailing garden fashion. Gloucestershire, for instance, took to those celebrated Edwardian gardens of The Souls – Arthur Balfour, Lord and Lady Elcho, the Tennants and the Wyndhams – with a peculiarly labyrinthine chain of enclosures, gardens within gardens, walled and high hedged – but walled for preference



The Palladian Bridge at Wilton House, Wiltshire

Wilton Garden at the post with our first Franco-Italian monster layout at Lulworth. Wiltshire is just beginning to reveal a romantic bias to water gardens over those clear chalk streams, but that is largely still ahead of me.

the gardens, lost, half-lost or wholly surviving, of the three most garden-rich counties in England – Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire – with Bristol and our very own Goldney Grotto at their strategic heart, making this University

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because stonemasons were two-a-penny on the Cotswold ridge. Dorset, on the other hand, had so many exquisite 17th-century manor houses that, Narcissus-like, its gardens tend to turn admiring faces towards those golden-columned and carved façades, losing in consequence the enclosure fixation. That exhilaratingly feudal county enjoyed, in addition, a time of royal fashion in James I's decadent but glorious and unfairly maligned reign. As a result it pipped the over-praised

Our strength in the MA Garden History teaching has been, and will continue to be, our earthy practical approach. We do not just sit back and extrapolate from other people's writings, literary exegesis and those other dryly academic and parasitic approaches to a subject. We do have, though, a tremendous resource because wise purchases have made the University's Special Collections truly special in garden terms. But primarily we get out into the field week after week tramping

the natural place for setting up a Centre for Garden History Studies. The result is rarely a lecture without new material and rarely a dull presentation or essay from a student in a group still flushed with the pleasure of recent scholarly discoveries and the challenge of turning accepted opinions on their head. ■

www.bristol.ac.uk/Depts/ArtHistory

The Historic Gardens of Wiltshire will be launched in May 2004 at Lydiard Park, during the Swindon Festival of Literature.