

LEARNING FROM REPTON'S BICENTENARY

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Few if any readers will be unaware that 2018 marked the bicentenary of the death of Humphry Repton. Unlike the tercentenary of the birth of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown two years earlier, this important milestone was not marked by an opportunistic flurry of synoptic publications, in part, perhaps, because of the continuing influence of the monumental works Stephen Daniels, Humphry Repton: landscape gardening and the geography of Georgian England (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999) and André Rogger, Landscapes of Taste: the Art of Humphry Repton's Red Books (London: Routledge, 2007). The year did, however, see the appearance of a large number of new volumes discussing Repton's activities in particular counties or regions, mainly based on research by volunteers in county gardens trusts, and these, directly or indirectly, have thrown a mass of new light on the man and his works. This article reviews some of this new research, although limitations of space prevent consideration of all aspects of the subject, such as Repton's approach to planting, his treatment of water and his placing of buildings within the landscape. Neither does it attempt to address the important question of why he adopted the role of a 'gentleman professor' instead of following Brown's more lucrative business model, involving the implementation as well as the mere design of new landscapes. An appendix lists new publications and conferences that have formed part of the celebrations of Repton's bicentenary.

The bicentenary of Humphry Repton's death in 2018 was marked by the appearance of a number of important publications examining his activities in particular counties or regions.

These provide much new information on the man and his works, but also serve to demonstrate the extraordinary value of the research groups of the various gardens trusts. The new works take a variety of forms. The volumes for Yorkshire and Hertfordshire present the entire text and reproduce all the illustrations from the relevant Red Books, accompanied by an interpretative essay – that in the Yorkshire volume, by Patrick Eyres, is a particularly insightful and innovative piece of work. Those for London, Kent and the West Midlands, in contrast, essentially comprise an introductory essay followed by discursive chapters penned by different authors, which address Repton's activities at particular places. The Sussex volume is slightly different, for the chapters describing Repton's works are in this case interspersed with a number of short essays on other topics, most notably one by Judy Tarling on the music played at Heathfield House, and its connections with Repton and the text of the Red Book. The Buckinghamshire volume is different again. It comprises a series of essays, followed by a useful gazetteer set out in standardised form. That for Norfolk, in contrast – partly because of Repton's intimate associations with that county – follows a more discursive and biographical format, discussing his early life in Norwich and Sustead, his commissions in chronological order, and his eventual burial at Aylsham.

This variety of approach does not, it should be emphasised, constitute in any way a problem or a drawback. Adopting a standardised format would have stifled innovation and originality. Moreover, the variety of the character of Repton's involvement in different geographical areas invites such a diversity of treatments. On occasions, where particular sites lie astride county boundaries or have been moved from one county to another by changes in administrative organisation, they have been afforded separate treatment in two volumes, making for some interesting contrasts of interpretation – as for example in the case of Bayham Abbey, ably discussed by Jane Davidson and Peta Hodges in the volume for Kent, and by Melisa Hay in that for Sussex.¹ The grounds at Ashridge, sundered by the boundary

between Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, are discussed in both volumes by Mick Thompson, impressively without repetition or self-plagiarism, in part because of the different structures, formats and conventions adopted in each.²

Differences in approach and organisation make it difficult to compare the merits of the various volumes but it can be said, without reservation, that all in their different ways contain real insights, and together significantly progress our knowledge of Repton. The main criticism which might be made of some examples concerns production quality, deficiencies in which were presumably enforced by economic pressures. While in some (such as that for Yorkshire) Red Book illustrations and other images are beautifully reproduced, in others they are small in size and on occasions rather blurry. Some of the volumes might also have benefited from more rigorous editing. But these are very minor quibbles.

In addition to these county-based and regional treatments, other recent contributions to the study of Repton should be noted. These include the slim but fascinating volume on his involvement at Haileybury in Hertfordshire, edited by Kate Harwood and Toby Parker; Keir Davidson's excellent book on his work for the Duke of Bedfordshire at Woburn Abbey and elsewhere; and the recently published special supplement of this journal, devoted to the papers presented at the Sheffield conference on 'Repton and Horticulture' (see appendix). Lastly, and in some ways most importantly, mention should be made of the new list of Repton attributions compiled by John Phibbs, working in association with members of the Gardens Trust and others.³ In short, the last few years have seen an astonishing amount of new research. It will take students of Repton many years to assimilate this wealth of information. But some of the ways in which old ideas may need to be modified are perhaps already clear.

WORKING PRACTICES AND THE RED BOOKS

Because it has involved a mass of research in family and estate archives, the recent publications are perhaps focused less exclusively on the Red Books, and on Repton's other writings, than earlier studies have been. And one effect of this has been to emphasise how Repton's involvement at particular places sometimes went well beyond the production of a Red Book. He might make repeat visits, sometimes spread over several years; or he might be called back to provide additional advice, occasionally after several years' absence. And this in turn has helped clarify the role of the Red Books themselves and to explain why their proposals often appear to have remained unimplemented. As Sarah Rutherford puts it in the Buckinghamshire volume: 'Repton is notorious for providing much advice that was never executed.'⁴ Indeed, Elizabeth Cairns in the Kent volume even suggests that 'in many cases Repton's Red Book lay on the library table to be looked at as a work of art or a conversation piece'.⁵ In reality, these new studies have served to support Rogger's suggestion that 'the equation "Repton = Red Book" can lead to a serious misrepresentation of his activities'.⁶

Holkham in Norfolk, where the Red Book provided a design for walks and a new pleasure grounds beside the lake, is an interesting case. Here, with the exception of Repton's unusual ferry boat, estate records show that virtually none of the Red Book proposals were implemented.⁷ Yet Repton was able to boast in print that much of his work could be seen there.⁸ Interestingly, his account book shows that, after the Red Book had been submitted, he was paid for several days 'staking out' and other work.⁹ This suggests that the Red Book proposals, especially regarding the layout of paths and planting, were modified following discussions with his clients. This in turn implies that at other places where their proposals appear to have been ignored, the landscape in question might nevertheless have been transformed under Repton's direction. The Red Books were in part a summary, not only of Repton's observations and ideas, but of discussions held with the client – in the phrase adopted as part of the title to Eyres and Lynch's Yorkshire volume – 'on the spot'. And such discussions will often have

continued after the Red Book was submitted, as their texts sometime make clear. That for Montreal in Kent includes a section explicitly entitled ‘hints for further conversation’.¹⁰

Indeed, even the role of the Red Book as a library conversation piece was not necessarily irrelevant to its function as a guide to improvement. Among the advantages which clients derived from having a Red Book, Repton informed Thomas Peckham Phipps of Little Green in Sussex in 1793, was:

that the outline of the plan being thus described on paper; if it should fortunately meet your wishes, you will be able with more ease to explain the whole design to those friends whom every Gentleman wishes to consult on important occasions, and without whose approbation and concurrence in opinion a plan is seldom executed with full satisfaction.¹¹

In some cases, estate records leave no doubt that a Red Book records only one part of Repton’s activities, as Anne Rowe has shown in the case of Panshanger in Hertfordshire. Here the Red Book, submitted in February 1800, is largely confined to advice about the architecture and siting of a proposed new house for Earl Cowper and the views across a proposed new lake.¹² Many of these proposals were rejected but the estate accounts and correspondence make clear that Repton was more widely involved in the design of the new landscape during visits made in September 1800 (three days) and March 1801 (four days).¹³ He supervised a massive programme of tree planting which is only referred to briefly in the Red Book, decided the line of drives and diverted roads, and much else. Here, the substantial archive allows the complexity of Repton’s involvement to be reconstructed. Often, however, the Red Book is the only surviving evidence because it has been preserved down the generations as a piece of art in its own right, while letters and receipts detailing Repton’s other work have long since been thrown away.

Given all this, some mismatch between what Red Books proposed, and what was implemented, should not surprise. We might also note – as Davidson rightly emphasises in his account of Repton’s activities at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire – that they provided, in many respects, rather general proposals which required more detailed work by architect, nurserymen and estate gardeners before they could be brought to reality, often perhaps much modified, as at Ashridge in Hertfordshire, where the key elements were eventually executed, by the architect Jeffrey Wyattville, but many in a rather different form, and sometimes in different places.¹⁴ And all this, of course, flowed directly from Repton’s refusal to follow Brown’s usual procedure, and fully undertake the implementation of his own designs. He sadly described how, on a return visit to Harewood in Yorkshire: ‘I have found many of my plans counteracted.’¹⁵

ARCHITECTS AND PATRONAGE

Another aspect of Repton’s working practices which has been illuminated by the recent research is his close association with architects – a subject currently being researched in depth by Mick Thompson. As is well known, from the very start of his career Repton believed that ‘some knowledge of Architecture is inseparable from the art I profess’.¹⁶ Initially such involvement was mainly (although never entirely) directed to the external appearance of a house: ‘to my profession belongs chiefly the external part of architecture, or a knowledge of the effects of buildings on the surrounding scenery’.¹⁷ But from around 1800, working closely with his son John Adey, he began to offer detailed designs for new houses or for major alterations to existing ones. Indeed, some of his later works appear to have been largely architectural in character.¹⁸ What the new research has perhaps served to highlight is the importance of Repton’s associations with architects in the early stages of his career; not only famous ones like Samuel and James Wyatt or John Nash, but also the less well-known figure of William Wilkins (senior).

Between 1788 and 1795, Repton worked with Wilkins at more than twenty places, many of them discussed and a few newly identified, by the recent research.¹⁹ Sometimes Wilkins designed a new house or made modifications to an existing one, at the same time as Repton was drawing up proposals for the grounds. Sometimes he provided designs for garden buildings at places being landscaped by Repton. We might assume that Repton was always the dominant figure but at first the roles of the two men may have been more evenly balanced. In the case of Northrepps and Bracondale in Norfolk (both c.1792), it is possible that it was Wilkins who actually secured the commission (Figure 1). The two men worked together quite regularly for seven years: Wilkins went on to have a moderately successful career in architecture and, more importantly, in architectural restoration. Probably the last place at which the two men cooperated was Bayham Abbey in Kent in 1799, where Repton's proposals included the creation of walks leading to the ruins of the old abbey and Wilkins was employed to advise on stabilising and restoring them.²⁰

It is possible that Repton's association with Wilkins, and the two Wyatts, may have been more important in the early stages of his career than we sometimes assume. Historians discussing how he managed to obtain commissions before the publication of his first book, *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795) have often emphasised his connection with a particular political group arising from his friendship with William Windham of Felbrigg in Norfolk.²¹ Windham belonged to the 'Portland Whigs', a conservative faction led by William Cavendish Bentinck, 3rd Duke of Portland. Initially in opposition, this group – alarmed by the radicalism of Charles Fox and his fellows - increasingly came to support William Pitt's conservative administration through the early 1790s, and in 1794 Portland himself took the post of Home Secretary.²² It has been argued that Repton's association with this set was instrumental in securing his first paid commission, at Catton, for Jeremiah Ives, in 1788. More importantly, it led to him meeting the Duke of Portland himself, who from as

early as 1789 paid Repton a retainer of 100 guineas per annum for advising on the grounds of his seats at Wellbeck in Nottinghamshire and Bulstrode in Buckinghamshire.²³ This in turn led to Repton being commissioned by Portland's political ally Earl Fitzwilliam at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire; and this was followed, a year later, by an invitation to advise on the grounds of Owston Hall, the seat of Earl Fitzwilliam's friend and political client, Bryan Cook.²⁴ As Portland's faction moved closer to Pitt, new avenues of political patronage opened up. Repton landscaped Pitt's own seat at Holwood in Kent, and those of several close allies, especially in south-east Cornwall.²⁵ The early stages of Repton's career 'were intertwined with Whig party politics'.²⁶

Some of the contributors to the various new studies provide support for this narrative. But others do not. Jonathan Lovie, for example, notes that 'the majority of Repton's Bucks clients whose political affiliations are known appear to have been closer to William Pitt than to Portland, or the overtly Tory Earl of Bridgewater'.²⁷ The Earl of Darnley at Cobham Hall in Kent was a leading Whig in the House of Lords but Repton was recommended to him not by the Duke of Portland but by his wife, the Duchess.²⁸ Repton's landscapes were not an obvious badge of political allegiance and general recommendation, friendships, and family connections (as well as his association with a number of key architects) were probably more important than party affiliation in securing work. It might seem obvious to us that Repton came to the Duke of Portland's attention through the latter's political connection with William Windham, but the duke himself was less certain, replying to Repton's enquiry about who had recommended him with the statement that 'I have been endeavouring to recollect but cannot name any one person in particular'.²⁹ In fact, it is often difficult or impossible to know how Repton came upon particular pieces of work: the social elite of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England were a comparatively tight-knit and interrelated group. As Lovie points out, Repton may have worked for William Drake at Shardeloes in Buckinghamshire in

1793-94 because he had been employed by his brother, Charles Drake Garrard, at Lamer in Hertfordshire in 1790-91. But in 1781 William Drake had married Rachel, the daughter of Jeremiah Ives of Catton in Norfolk, so the commission may also have owed something to that connection.³⁰

Repton's association with a particular political grouping may have helped in the early stages of his career but its importance should not, perhaps, be pushed too far. Thanks to the meticulous work of John Phibbs, it is now possible to map the distribution of Repton's commissions which appear to date to the periods before and after 1795. The most striking feature of the former is their marked concentration in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, extending into the adjacent counties of Hertfordshire and Middlesex (Figure 2). Over forty per cent of Repton's work in these first seven years was concentrated in these five counties. Many wealthy people lived in Hertfordshire, Essex and Middlesex, within easy reach of London; but Repton's commissions did not as yet extend significantly into the counties lying to the south of the Thames. The distribution perhaps shows the primary importance of local recommendations, from one owner to another, around the place where Repton lived – Hare Street in Essex – or had lived until 1786, and near which many of his family continued to reside – Sustead in Norfolk; together with Repton's careful exploitation of established social connections. Outside this core area early commissions were more thinly scattered, albeit with some noticeable concentrations: a cluster around Portland's seat at Bulstrode extends the main focus of Repton's activities into the area to the west of London; seven of Repton's early commissions are to be found within twenty miles of the duke's other seat at Wellbeck.

REPTON'S SYSTEM

Recent work has also, albeit often more obliquely, thrown light on Repton's style. It has often been argued that Repton lacked stylistic consistency and that he sacrificed artistic credibility to the needs of business. He was 'stylistically open to whatever fashion a patron might

prefer'; and 'The luxury of abstract and consistent principles ... was largely denied Repton'.³¹ The recent publications, however, and especially the texts and extracts from the Red Books they contain, invite us to revisit such notions. In fact, Repton's overall approach to landscape seems firmly rooted in theory and principle: his approach was cerebral, shaped by words and concepts, including scientific concepts, as much as by artistic sensibilities. His stated ambition was, after all, to 'establish fixed principles in the art of laying out ground'.³²

One of the key concepts structuring his approach was 'appropriation': the enjoyment of ownership and the celebration of its continuity and extent:

The pleasure of appropriation is gratified in viewing a landscape which cannot be injured by the malice or bad taste of a neighbouring intruder; thus an ugly barn, a ploughed field, or any obtrusive object which disgraces the scenery of a park, looks as if it belonged to another, and therefore robs the mind of the pleasures derived from appropriation, or the unity and continuity of unmixed property.³³

Repton routinely manipulated the landscape in order to demonstrate ownership, or even to imply a more spurious dominance of a locality than a client really possessed. One device, practised from the very start, was to alter the line of an approach drive – or to create an entirely new approach – so that the entrance was placed in a village, close to houses and cottages. At Livermere in 1792, for example, he suggested that the approach to the house should be altered to make the village 'more appropriated to the Estate, and the same kind of paling should every where be used, to make a unity of property' (Figure 3).³⁴ At grand houses like Harewood in Yorkshire, Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire or Tatton Park in Cheshire, in contrast, Repton proposed rebuilding the cottages at the main entrance in some 'model' form.³⁵ A concern for 'appropriation' had many ramifications. When in 1791 Repton discussed the location of a proposed new residence at Northrepps in Norfolk he listed among the disadvantages of an elevated site, 'the landscape being less appropriated to the mansion,

because we must necessarily look over a vast tract of country not in the power of any single individual to improve'.³⁶ Some students of Repton have emphasised how, as he grew older and the conditions of the rural poor deteriorated as a consequence of the French wars, enclosure and other developments, he came to emphasise more and more the importance of the landowner's paternalistic role in the local community. But to some extent such views were there from the beginning. The landscape of an estate should express, at the very least, the appearance of a contented and well-housed tenantry. Dilapidated slums clustering at the park gates betokened poverty, or miserly attitudes unbecoming of a gentleman – benevolence and paternalism were one of the ways in which 'appropriation' was demonstrated. The Red Book for Stoke Park in Herefordshire of 1792 declared that 'as the number of labourers constitutes one of the requisites of grandeur, comfortable habitations for its poor dependents ought to be provided'.³⁷

'Character' was another key concept, and one more frequently discussed, although more complex and fluid. In part it was an antidote to what many contemporaries thought was the main deficiency with Brown's landscapes – that they were formulaic and repetitive, suppressing the individuality of particular places. In the Red Book for Hanslope in Buckinghamshire in 1792 Repton stated his intention to 'avoid the sameness of which my ingenious predecessor has often been accused ... by sedulously examining the Character and situation of each respective place, and suggesting the improvements which are most congenial to it'.³⁸ But 'Character' had many other implications. It embraced the idea that the architecture of a mansion should influence the layout of the surrounding grounds, including the nature of the planting and the style of ornamental buildings and lodges. It was because house and grounds should thus form a harmonious whole that Repton – from the start of his career - argued that old 'gothic' buildings, including sixteenth- and some seventeenth-century manor houses, required some degree of formal planting. At places like Cobham Hall in Kent

in 1790 or Prestwood in Worcestershire in 1791 he thus retained avenues planted in the seventeenth century because they suited the archaic character of the architecture of the house.³⁹

In establishing 'character', the function and status of a house were as important as its architecture and Repton, from the start, carefully distinguished between a 'villa', in the sense of a residence with little in the way of associated landed property and which was regularly, but perhaps not permanently, occupied; a 'shooting box', used sporadically; and a true country house at the centre of a landed estate, in frequent or permanent occupation. Country houses were themselves divided between those which formed the homes of local squires, and the 'palatial' residences of great aristocrats, for 'character' was, above all, all about appropriate social display. The size and sophistication of a house and its grounds should not only be in harmony with each other, but should also accord with the wealth and status of their owner. Great palaces required large parks and complex, extensive pleasure grounds; smaller manor houses required less impressive grounds; small 'villas' might have no park at all, but needed in turn to be differentiated from 'mere farm-houses'.

The latter was a particularly important matter in rural districts in which the influx of wealthy businessmen, manufacturers and bankers was occurring on a substantial scale. Numerous 'villas' were, in the decades either side of 1800, being erected, often on the sites of - or were made by adapting - minor manor houses or large farmhouses. Such residences needed to be clearly distinguished from the homes of neighbouring farmers. As Repton expressed it in the Red Book for Hatchlands in Surrey in 1800: 'surely there ought to be as great a distinction between the habitation of the gentleman, and that of the farmer, as between their manners, their habits of life, and their feelings'.⁴⁰ In the Red Book for Woodhill in Hertfordshire, for which a Red Book was prepared in 1803, Repton commented:

Every rational improvement of a place must depend on its Character, and the Character must depend on its uses. If a Nobleman lets a palace to a Farmer, it will cease to be a palace; and if a Gentleman visibly lives in the midst of barns and dung yards, his house will no longer be a mansion but a farm house. A Villa, a Shooting box and every Rural retreat of elegance require the removal or the concealment of all that is dirty and offensive.⁴¹

Repton took particular pains at such places to hide stables, outhouses and the like which, while they might be necessary adjuncts of a gentleman's residence, were redolent of the life of the common farmer. Much could be done using slight, suggestive touches. The area to the south of Woodhill House comprised a 'plain grass field bounded by a meagre and ragged outline'. Repton commented how 'a covered seat at a distance, or a bench round a tree near the house will change its Character from a common grass field to the Lawn of a Gentleman's Place'.⁴² Even minor manor houses might pose problems in these socially uncertain districts. Repton thought the 'character' of Sundridge Park in Kent 'very doubtful'. It had 'too much importance for a mere farmhouse, yet it is neither sufficiently large to be considered a Country residence nor sufficiently elegant for a villa'.⁴³

The urgent need to distinguish farmhouse from gentleman's residence explains in part Repton's hostility to the *ferme orneé*. The owner of Warley near Birmingham, Samuel Galton, was inclined to lay out his property in the manner of an ornamental farm, and Repton took up ten pages of the Red Book of 1795 explaining why this was a bad idea.⁴⁴ It also explains, in part, his concern to obscure views of the working countryside with perimeter belts or strategically placed plantations. The park was a landscape of affluence and leisure comprising uninterrupted grass; the countryside was a productive tract of land subdivided into fields by hedges. The two had a different 'character'. The owner of Hanslope in Buckinghamshire, Edward Watts, was a keen agriculturalist, but this did not mean that the

views of the fields lying beyond the park - with their hedges full of pollarded trees, cropped and mutilated by tenants – were acceptable. In the Red Book for 1792 Repton blotted them out with massed planting (Figures 4 and 5):

I am certain that it is impossible to preserve consistency if we unite in the same place the Gentleman's-seat and the Farm house. The first ought to look on such objects only as are in harmony with the elegance of the apartments, the latter may look on ploughed fields but with more propriety should command the view of its barns, stables and muck yards.⁴⁵

The central importance of the concept of 'character' in Repton's work also helps to explain his complicated relationship with the picturesque. Repton, for the most part, greatly appreciated the kind of dramatic and rugged scenery over which Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price enthused, as his work at a number of the places described in the new volumes makes clear. At Mulgrave Castle in Yorkshire in 1793 he sketched the rocky landscape of the brook and cascade to the south-west of the house and discussed the 'natural beauties which now lie hid within these dark and inaccessible vallies' (Figure 6).⁴⁶ But – as at Blaise near Bristol in 1795 – the mansion itself was set in a more placid part of the grounds.⁴⁷ Rugged beauties were something to be visited and enjoyed, and displayed on the paths or drives running through a property. They were not an appropriate setting - did not have the correct 'character' - for the residence of a gentleman. This said, and again as much of the new research implies, part of Repton's dispute with the 'prophets of the picturesque' also arose from definitions: the word itself was, 'like many others in common use ... more easy to be understood than defined'.⁴⁸ Repton often employed it much as we might today, not just to refer to the wild and the rugged, but also to describe scenes which were attractive in a quaint, charming and rural way, because of their irregular and unplanned, accidental nature, such as a 'snug thatched cottage ... picturesquely embosomed in trees', with smoke rising its chimney, or a distant glimpse of a

church tower.⁴⁹ The role of the landscape gardener, like that of the artist, was to enhance such scenes of quiet rustic beauty by carefully hiding some objects, and framing and enhancing others.

Other key principles structured Repton's disciplined approach but 'character' and 'appropriation' were of particular importance, and both were intimately connected with Repton's attitude to what might be called the public face of landscape. He was happy to emphasise the importance of a residence, and thus of its owner, and also on occasions to exaggerate it, although only within reasonable limits. His desire to create approaches which displayed the residence to best advantage but which took care not, by meandering excessively, to reveal the limited extent of its grounds; his concern to mask the boundaries of the park and to maximise its apparent size; such things were calculated to appeal, not only to major landowners, but also to the kinds of local squires and wealthy businessmen for whom Repton, to a far greater degree than Brown, often worked. Visual illusion and subtle psychological triggers lay at the heart of his work, together with a deep understanding of how people 'read' the landscape in social terms. At Honing in Norfolk in 1792 he bemoaned how the existing entrance to the park left the public road at right angles: 'the strait line [of the road] does not stop at the park, but passes by it, and seems to lead to some other object of greater importance'.⁵⁰ He proposed that the drive should instead leave the highway by a smooth curve or, as he expressed it in the Red Book for Lamer in Hertfordshire of 1792, the high road should 'appear to branch from the approach rather than the approach from the high road'.⁵¹ The visitor should evidently be left with the impression that the entire road network of the district led to the front door of the mansion. Indeed, Repton's perennial enthusiasm for lodges – almost invariably in the form of single buildings rather than split structures, and usually built in a style that fitted the 'character' of the mansion itself – was largely because,

as his son John Adey put it, they served ‘to mark the entrance to a place with importance’ (Figure 7).⁵²

THE DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE

Matters of outward show were not, however, Repton’s only concern. If they had been, it is unlikely that his career would have been as successful as it was. He was equally, if not more, interested in providing clients with grounds which they could enjoy and feel at home in. His designs were thus shaped by considerations of utility, practicality, domesticity and ‘cheerfulness’, the latter a favourite word in Repton’s lexicon. He was especially interested in the position or ‘situation’ of a house, in the views which might be enjoyed from its principal rooms, and in the design of walks and pleasure grounds. All, in their different ways, could contribute to the pleasures of a comfortable family life in the countryside. Indeed, Repton’s enthusiasm for domestic life – he was intensely attached to his own family – is perhaps the real key to understanding his style. In Jon Finch’s words, ‘Repton placed the family at the centre of his landscape philosophy’ (Figure 8).⁵³ This explains in part his particular enthusiasm for gardens and pleasure grounds. In Keir Davidson’s words, Repton’s aim at Woburn Abbey, for example, was ‘to make the pleasure grounds a place where the whole family and their guests could relax and enjoy themselves, together or individually, where the children could play and the adults pursue their interests in plants and plant collections’.⁵⁴ The ‘appropriation’ of the pleasure grounds to the mansion – represented visually in innumerable Red Book illustrations by seats and benches scattered casually across lawns, or strategically placed beside paths – itself expressed the regular use which Repton expected the owner and his family, and perhaps to a lesser degree their guests, would make of them.⁵⁵ Family use is also rather clearly indicated in the ‘children’s gardens’ that Repton provided at Endsleigh, Woburn and elsewhere: the relevant section of the Red Book for the former site includes a lengthy digression on children and childhood.

Concern for the pleasures of family life also explains Repton's interest in domestic planning, especially in the later stages of his career, and also perhaps why his designs for parks tend to focus on paths and walks, rather than on drives, as Brown's mainly appear to have been. To an extent such an emphasis reflects the comparatively limited extent of the properties on which he often worked. But even at large aristocratic landscapes paths often featured prominently in his proposals. Leisurely walking was an inclusive activity, a form of recreation suitable for women as much as for men, for children and for young adults as much as for their parents, even for the elderly. Walks were laid out especially with family use in mind: 'Few visitors will see the beauties of a place from a walk, compared with those who may view them from the house or in the approach'.⁵⁶ Of course, as Jane Bradney has discussed, Repton often did lay out 'drives appropriated for pleasure only'.⁵⁷ But this was usually only in the very largest parks, and often where interesting destinations could not easily be reached on foot. At Cobham Hall in Kent in 1790 Repton thus proposed creating new drives for the specific purpose of allowing visitors to inspect the ancient oaks, for which the park was already famous.⁵⁸

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

Some garden historians have argued that, especially as regards gardens and pleasure grounds, Repton's emphasis and style changed over time. The immediate grounds of the house became, as his career progressed, more elaborate and diverse, and eventually more architectural and geometric in character. All this has been associated with the nature of his clientele. From the very start of his career Repton worked on smaller 'villa' properties, the homes of businessmen and professionals, far more than Brown had ever done but, as wartime taxation reduced the enthusiasm of the landed gentry for 'improvements', the proportion of such clients increased markedly. For those whose carriage drives were short, an emphasis on detail and structure was essential. A small plot of land laid out as a park might resemble no

more than a grass paddock, but flower beds, terraces and formal planting could look impressive even when they occupied a restricted area.

While the recent research has not decisively challenged this narrative, it has tended to undermine certain aspects of it. In particular, some contributions have made it clear that Repton's particular emphasis on gardens, rather than parks, was present from the start. As Karen Lynch has pointed out, as early as 1790 a note in the *Daily Advertiser*, Kingston, Jamaica (no less) described how 'a Mr Repton' had established 'a new profession ... called a landscape Gardener', and that 'It is intended to combine the minuter beauties of gardening with the bolder features of landscape'.⁵⁹ The evidence presented in the new studies confirms that relatively complex, extensive and diverse gardens, and the creation of a strong 'foreground' in the view from the house, were features of his style by the early 1790s (Figures 9 and 10). Moreover, while it may be true that Repton's most complex and formal grounds were only designed after 1800, these were not usually associated with 'villas' at all but with great aristocratic residences like Woburn Abbey where, as Repton explained in 1804, the grounds were to be 'embellished and furnished like its palace, where good taste is everywhere conspicuous'. Here, as elsewhere, greatness was not to be confused with extent. It was rather to be expressed through complexity and sophistication:

It is not by the length or breadth of the walk that greatness of character in garden scenery can ever be supported: it is rather by its diversity, and the succession of interesting objects. In this part of a great place, we may venture to extract pleasure from *Variety*, from *Contrast*, and even from *Novelty*, without endangering the character of *Greatness*.⁶⁰

Diverse and elaborate gardens fitted the 'character' of great aristocratic residences, and this was particularly true of those built in some ancient form, had long histories extending back to the Middle Ages, or were being newly rebuilt in the fashionable gothic

mode. As Mick Thompson argues, it was no coincidence that the elaborate gardens at Ashridge – accompanying a vast new gothic house by James Wyatt, on an ancient site with monastic and royal associations - contained geometric parterres and archaic features like the ‘Holie Well’ and the ‘Monk’s Garden’, with its rows of flower beds in the guise of graves (Figures 11 and 12). Great palaces, and especially pseudo-medieval piles like this, demanded gardens of appropriately diverse, structured and geometric ‘character’.⁶¹

Repton claimed in 1816 that villas without extensive grounds had ‘of late had the greatest claim to my attention’.⁶² Yet while it is true that the number of businessmen and professionals he counted among his clients increased markedly at the expense of the local gentry in the latter stages of his career, the proportion of large landowners and aristocrats also grew. Over a quarter of his commissions in the period after 1804 were for lords, dukes, earls and barons, or their sons. In the period after 1810 the figure rises to around a third. The apparent shift in Repton’s style in the later stages of his career, towards more complex and formal gardens, may in part reflect the prominence in his work not of ‘villas’, but of grand or palatial mansions, many constructed in pseudo-medieval, gothic mode.

CONCLUSION

Repton’s success, like that of all great landscape designers, depended on his ability to provide clients with ornamental grounds that suited their lifestyles. Looked at in this way, it is possible to identify a number of contemporary social and economic developments which might have shaped his style and/ or ensured that his approach found favour with contemporaries. We might note the increasing importance in the decades either side of 1800 of the domestic sphere, and of the nuclear family, in the lives of the wealthy, something apparently reflected in Repton’s particular concern for pleasure grounds and walks; the continued increase in the range of new plants available from distant lands, which provided further encouragement for the provision of diverse garden spaces in which these might be

displayed; and perhaps above all the challenges posed by the new enthusiasm for ‘gothic’ architecture. This did not ‘replace’ classical styles but provided an alternative to them. Brown had usually found himself designing the settings for Neo-Palladian or Neoclassical mansions. Repton had to match his landscapes to residences built in a more diverse range of styles. Hence his perennial concern for ‘character’ and ‘unity’, and for the harmony of landscape and architecture; hence his retention in places of archaic planting, and to an extent the return of geometric planting in pleasure grounds; and hence his increasing involvement, over time, in architecture, allowing him to better co-ordinate the design of house and landscape.

Of particular importance in ensuring the popularity of Repton’s style were the major shifts in the distribution of wealth – towards the industrial, commercial and professional classes – which occurred as England’s economy expanded rapidly and industrialisation accelerated. It is, however, probably too simple to see Repton’s approach to landscape as a direct response to this changing market. He despised most villa owners and he was, as noted, commissioned by some of the greatest in the land. His *Memoir* is replete with references to the lords, dukes, earls, ministers of state, prime ministers and the ‘four Lord Chancellors’ with whom he had had ‘the honour and the pleasure’ to be employed.⁶³ It is perhaps more accurate to say that to Repton the increasing affluence of businessmen and professionals represented not only a market but also a challenge. Deeply conservative in his attitudes, he was keen to use landscapes to reflect, and reaffirm, social distinctions. This is why, at the core of his ‘system’, lay the belief that the ‘character’ of palaces, manor houses and villas should all be clearly distinct from each other, as well as from the farms and cottages around them. Repton’s landscapes provided his clients with a measure of display and yet, at the same time, served to curtail any potential excesses, bringing reassurance in socially uncertain times.

Was Repton an innovative genius whose life experience made him uniquely equipped to respond to the needs of the times? Or was he merely one of many landscape gardeners who were forging a broadly shared style but – in part by virtue of his four great books on landscape design – the best known, both at the time and today? The answer probably lies somewhere between these two extremes. Certainly, contemporary commentators were often less impressed by his role than modern writers. John Claudius Loudon, writing in 1806, evidently believed that Repton was pompous, conceited, and that he had in particular appropriated to himself a prominence which was undeserved: ‘Mr Repton in his writings displays the highest opinion of his own merits, and an unfair contempt for his contemporary professors of modern landscape gardening.’⁶⁴ One obituary declared that he ‘was an artist of elegant attainments and good taste, more calculated to follow than to lead’.⁶⁵

In the space of a short article it is impossible to do full justice to the many ways in which recent work – mainly carried out by gardens’ trusts volunteers – is transforming our understanding of Repton. This article does not discuss what we have learned about his approach to planting, his treatment of water and his placing of buildings within the landscape; nor does it consider why he chose to only be involved in the design of new landscapes and not their implementation. But the new research has thrown important new light on these and many other topics. The celebrations of Repton’s bicentenary have created an intellectual legacy of which the world of English garden history can be proud.

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APPENDIX: NEW PUBLICATIONS AND CONFERENCES CELEBRATING REPTON’S BICENTENARY

County publications

Bate, Sally, Rachel Savage and Tom Williamson (eds), *Humphry Repton in Norfolk*

(Aylsham: Norfolk Gardens Trust, 2018)

Batty, Susie (ed.), *Humphry Repton in Sussex* (Shoreham-by-Sea: Sussex Gardens Trust, 2018).

Eyres, Patrick, and Karen Lynch, *On the Spot: the Yorkshire Red Books of Humphry Repton, Landscape Gardener* (Huddersfield: New Arcadian Press, 2018)

Flood, Susan and Tom Williamson (eds), *Humphry Repton in Hertfordshire: Documents and Landscapes* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2018)

Kent Gardens Trust, *Humphry Repton in Kent* (Eynsford: Kent Gardens Trust, 2018)

London Parks & Gardens Trust, *Repton in London* (London: London Parks & Gardens Trust, 2018)

Rutherford, Sarah (ed.), *Humphry Repton in Buckinghamshire and Beyond* (Aylesbury: Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust, 2018)

Whithead, David and Jane Bradley, *'In the Enemy's Quarters': Humphry Repton in the West Midlands* (Leominster: Herefordshire and Worcester Gardens Trust and The Woolhope Club, 2018)

Other publications

Davidson, Keir, *Humphry Repton and the Russell Family: featuring the Red Books for Woburn Abbey and Endsleigh, Devon* (Woburn: The Bedford Estates, 2018)

Parker, Toby, and Kate Harwood (eds), *Structure and Landscape: William Wilkins and Humphry Repton at Haileybury 1806-1810* (Hertford: Hertfordshire Gardens Trust, 2018)

Phibbs, John, 'Repton attributed sites', at <https://thegardenstrust.org/wp.../06/Phibbs-Repton-sites-attributions-July-2017.xlsx>

Simms, Barbara (ed.), 'Repton and Horticulture', *Garden History*, Suppl.1 (Spring 2018)

Conferences

‘Repton and Horticulture’; Dorothy Fox Education Centre, Sheffield Botanical Gardens, 20-21 September 2018.

‘Celebrating Humphry Repton’: Ashridge House, Hertfordshire, 10-11 August 2018.

‘The Prophet in his Own Country’: Gardens Trust/Norfolk Gardens Trust conference, West Runton, Norfolk, 1 -2 June 2018.

‘Discovering the Real Repton’: conference held in association with the ‘Repton Revealed’ exhibition, Garden Museum, London, 5 November 2018.

LIST OF CAPTIONS

1. The proposed new house at Northrepps in Norfolk, designed by William Wilkins, from the undated Red Book of c. 1792; private collection
2. The changing distribution of Repton’s commissions. Left: those which probably began before 1795. Right: those which began in or after 1795. Based on the information collated by John Phibbs
3. In the Red Book for Livermere in Suffolk, drawn up in 1792, Repton suggested that the approach to the house should be altered to make the village ‘more appropriated to the Estate, and the same kind of paling should every where be used, to make a unity of property’; private collection
- 4 and 5. The Red Book for Hanslope Park in Buckinghamshire, 1791: the view to the south, with flaps down, and lifted. Typically, Repton was keen to obscure with planting any views of the arable fields lying outside the park; reproduced courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum

6. Red Book for Mulgrave Castle, Yorkshire, 1793: 'The brook and cascade'. Repton was always keen to include rugged and dramatic features in his designs, but usually at a distance from the mansion; private collection
7. Repton's design for a new entrance lodge in the form of a picturesque cottage at Wood Hall, Hilgay, Norfolk in 1807. The house itself was an old seventeenth-century structure: had it been a modern classical building, the lodge would probably have been designed in a similar 'Grecian' mode; private collection, photo by Roger Last
8. Watercolour by Repton, dated 1782, showing his family in the gardens at Sustead Hall in Norfolk, c.1782. Repton's intense interest in family life was a major influence on his style; private collection, photo by Roger Last
9. Red Book for Shrubland Park, Suffolk, 1789. The view to the south-west with flaps down, before improvement; private collection
10. Red Book for Shrubland Park, Suffolk, 1789. The view to the south-west, with flaps lifted. From the start of his career Repton was often keen to provide a 'foreground' of lawn and shrubbery to the view from the house; private collection
11. Repton's plan of the gardens at Ashridge, on the Hertfordshire/ Buckinghamshire border, from the Red Book of 1813. Repton's most complex and 'formal' designs for pleasure grounds were prepared for 'palatial', aristocratic residences; reproduced courtesy Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles
12. Red Book for Ashridge, 1813: the design of the 'Monk's Garden' evoked the site's medieval monastic past; reproduced courtesy Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

¹ Jane Davidson and Peta Hodges, ‘Bayham Abbey: an ancient site revived’, in Kent Gardens Trust (Eynsford: Kent Gardens Trust, 2018) (Henceforth *Repton in Kent*), pp. 80-100; Melisa Hay, ‘The landscape of Bayham Abbey: gardening and architecture united’, in Susie Batty (ed.), (Shoreham-by-Sea: Sussex Gardens Trust, 2018) (Henceforth *Repton in Sussex*), pp. 42-52.

² Mick Thompson, ‘Ashridge’, in Sarah Rutherford (ed.), *Repton in Buckinghamshire* (Aylesbury: Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust, 2018) (Henceforth *Repton in Buckinghamshire*), pp. 77-84; Susan Flood and Tom Williamson (eds), *Humphry Repton in Hertfordshire: Documents and Landscapes* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2018) (Henceforth *Repton in Hertfordshire*), pp. 24-25.

³ <https://thegardenstrust.org/wp.../06/Phibbs-Repton-sites-attributions-July-2017.xlsx>.

⁴ Sarah Rutherford, ‘So just what did Repton do in Buckinghamshire’, *Repton in Buckinghamshire*, pp. 30-45 (p. 43).

⁵ Elizabeth Cairns, ‘Introduction’, *Repton in Kent*, pp.12-33 (p. 31).

⁶ Rogger, *Landscapes of Taste*, p. 74.

⁷ Sally Bate, Rachel Savage and Tom Williamson (eds), *Humphry Repton in Norfolk* (Aylsham: Norfolk Gardens Trust, 2018) (Henceforth *Repton in Norfolk*), pp. 50-57.

⁸ Humphry Repton, *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (London, 1795), p. 29; *Observations on the Theory and Practise of Landscape Gardening*, pp. 42-43.

⁹ Humphry Repton’s account book, Norfolk Record Office, Norwich, MS10.

¹⁰ Hugh Vaux, ‘Montreal: Repton’s ideas interpreted’, *Repton in Kent*, pp. 118-37 (p. 122).

¹¹ Red Book for Little Green, West Sussex Record Office, Add Mss520; see, also, Susie Batty, ‘Qui fait aimer les champs, aimer la vertu’, *Repton in Sussex*, pp. 9-19.

¹² ‘Panshanger’, in *Repton in Hertfordshire*, pp. 120-25, based on the research of Anne Rowe.

¹³ Ledger of Thomas Pallett (Steward at Panshanger), 1798-1811, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies DE/P/EA23/2; DE/P/E6/1; DE/P/E2/1.

¹⁴ Davidson, *Repton and the Russell Family*, pp. 54-59; Thompson, 'Ashridge', pp. 79-81.

¹⁵ Ann Gore and George Carter (eds), *Humphry Repton's Memoirs* (London: Michael Russell, 2005), p. 87; Patrick Eyres and Karen Lynch, *On the Spot: the Yorkshire Red Books of Humphry Repton, Landscape Gardener* (Huddersfield: New Arcadian Press, 2018), p. 76.

¹⁶ Red Book for Panshanger Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, DE/P/P31.

¹⁷ Repton, *Sketches and Hints*, p. 14.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Repton in Norfolk*, 'Barningham Hall', pp. 117-29; and 'Hoveton Hall', p.139.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 63-72, 81-92; David Whithead and Jane Bradley, *'In the Enemy's Quarters': Humphry Repton in the West Midlands* (Leominster: Herefordshire and Worcestershire Gardens Trust and The Woolhope Club, 2018), pp. 28, 42, 69; Batty, 'Little Green', pp. 9 - 19; Hazelle Jackson, Tudor Davies, David Fergusson and Dave Booker, 'Humphry Repton in north-west Kent: Langley Park, Sundridge Park and Holwood Park', in London Parks & Gardens Trust, *Repton in London* (London: London Parks & Gardens Trust, 2018) (Henceforth *Repton in London*), pp. 49-58; Emily Parker, 'In answer to several questions proposed for my consideration: Repton's recommendations for the estate at Kenwood', *Repton in London*, pp. 9-20.

²⁰ Hay, 'The landscape of Bayham Abbey', pp. 42-52.

²¹ Daniels, *Humphry Repton*, pp. 76-85, 154; S. Daniels, 'The political landscape', in G.Carter, P.Goode and K.Laurie (eds), *Humphry Repton, Landscape Gardener 1752-1818* (Norwich 1982), pp. 110-21; Eyres and Lynch, *On the Spot*, pp. 143-44.

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Portland coalition of 1794 and the origins of the Tory party', *History*, 83/270 (1998), pp. 249-64.

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²⁴ Eyres and Lynch, *On the Spot*, pp. 31, 143.

²⁵ Daniels, *Humphry Repton*, p. 35; Daniels, 'Political landscape', p. 111.

²⁶ Daniels, 'Political landscape', p. 110.

²⁷ Jonathan Lovie, 'Patronage and politics', *Repton in Buckinghamshire*, pp. 46-53 (pp. 48-49).

²⁸ Gore and Carter, *Repton's Memoirs*, p. 102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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³¹ Timothy Mowl, *Gentlemen and Players: Gardeners of the English landscape* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 177; John Dixon Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 140.

³² Repton, *Sketches and Hint*, p. 23.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³⁴ Red Book for Livermere, Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich branch, HA93.

³⁵ Eyres and Lynch, *On the Spot*, pp. 75-76.

³⁶ *Repton in Norfolk*, pp. 63-72.

³⁷ The Red Book for Stoke Park in Herefordshire of 1792. Copy at Herefordshire Archives and Records Centre, BE37.

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<http://cdm.bostonathenaeum.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15482coll3/id/4366> (accessed July 4 2018). See, also, Gill Grocott and Jill Stansfield, 'Hanslope Park, Hanslope', *Repton in Buckinghamshire*, pp. 102-8.

³⁹ Mike O'Brien and Rosemary Dymond, 'Cobham Hall: "This venerable pile"', *Repton in Kent*, pp. 34-57 (p. 47); Whithead and Bradley, *Repton in the West Midlands*, pp. 24-26.

⁴⁰ Red Book for Hatchlands, Morgan Library and Museum, New York. Available online at <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/humphry-repton/sketchbook/123228> (accessed June 3 2018).

⁴¹ Red Book for Woodhill, John Soane Museum Collection, SM (163) 64/6/2.

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⁴³ Red Book for Sundridge Park, 1793. Quoted in Jackson, Davies and Fergusson, 'Repton in north-west Kent', p. 90.

⁴⁴ Whithead and Bradley, *Repton in the West Midlands*, p. 67.

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⁴⁷ Red Book for Blaise Castle. Bristol Museums Collection, Mb2400: available online at <http://museums.bristol.gov.uk/details.php?irn=117900> (accessed December 2 2018).

⁴⁸ Humphry Repton, *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London, 1816), p. 217.

⁴⁹ Red Book for Holkham. Private collection: discussed in *Repton in Norfolk*, pp. 50-57.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-80.

⁵¹ *Repton in Hertfordshire*, p. 98.

⁵² Repton, *Fragments*, p. 184.

⁵³ Jon Finch, 'Humphry Repton: domesticity and design', *Garden History* 47, Suppl. 1 (Spring 2019), pp. 24-38 (p. 34).

⁵⁴ Davidson, *Humphry Repton and the Russell Family*, p. 45.

⁵⁵ Rogger, *Landscapes of Taste*, pp. 312-14.

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⁵⁷ Jane Bradney, 'The carriage-drive in Humphry Repton's landscapes', *Garden History*, 33/1 (Summer 2005), pp. 31-46.

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⁶⁴ John Claudius Loudon, *A Treatise on Forming, Improving and Managing Country Residences*, 2 vols (London, 1806), vol. 2, p. 703.

⁶⁵ Anon., 'Obituary for Humphry Repton', *Gentleman's Magazine* 88 (1818), p. 648.