

A Response to Oliver Cox, 'A Mistaken Iconography? Eighteenth-century visitor accounts of Stourhead', *Garden History* 40, 1 (2012), pp. 98–116.

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Oliver Cox's essay on the iconography of the gardens at Stourhead in Wiltshire, published in 2012, broke new ground in a number of ways and opened up novel approaches to the interpretation of eighteenth-century designed landscapes which have not as yet, it is probably fair to say, been fully explored. It also raised, by implication rather than explicitly, fundamental questions about how we understand the significance, or significances, of historic designed landscapes. It remains a seminal contribution not just to our knowledge of a particular garden, but to the study of garden history more generally.

The gardens at Stourhead perhaps need no introduction. Created by Henry Hoare, son of a wealthy banker, between 1741 and his death in 1785, their core comprises a group of mainly classical stone buildings scattered around the margins of an irregularly shaped lake: the Pantheon, the Grotto and the Temple of Flora, with the Five Arched Bridge spanning an inlet beside the latter. The gothic Watch Cottage was a late (1782) addition. From the lake a path climbs away to the south, reaching the Temple of Apollo, before returning to the water's edge via the medieval Bristol Cross, erected here in 1765. Rides cut through the estate woodland to the north-west provide access to further structures, in this case all in gothic mode: St Peter's Pump, another genuinely medieval feature brought from Bristol; the Convent; and Alfred's Tower, crowning the escarpment and marking the traditional site of that king's victory over the Danes in 879.ⁱ Stourhead is a magnet for visitors today, as it was in the eighteenth century. It has also been the subject of considerable academic attention, with a range of scholars advancing, in the absence of any surviving explanation afforded by Hoare himself, a variety of interpretations of what the gardens might mean.

In the 1960s and early 70s Edward Malins and Kenneth Woodbridge argued that their essential layout comprised an allusion to Virgil's *Aeneid*. The former suggested that the view across the lake, to the Pantheon, was closely modelled on the Claude Lorraine painting generally known as 'Coast View of Delos with Aeneas', and noted that the inscription written above the door of the Temple of Flora, 'Procul o, procul este profan' uninitiate!', are the words uttered by the Sibyl before leading Aeneas into the underworld.ⁱⁱ Woodbridge combined these two crucial clues with others to construct his influential reading of the gardens as a circuit walk which symbolised and referenced the story of Aeneas and the founding of Rome.ⁱⁱⁱ This relatively straightforward classical reading was then extended and developed by Ronald Paulson, Michael Charlesworth, Max Schultz and James Turner in more complex symbolic terms; as a representation of moral choices to be made, especially between a life of civic duty, and one of rural retirement and contemplation; or as an allegory on the passage through life of the Christian soul.^{iv} Malcolm Kelsall in 1983 went further, arguing that the gardens used the *Aeneid* theme to raise questions about the relationship between the values of classical civilization, and those of Christian revealed religion.^v Cox noted how all these readings were based on the design, details or positioning of the classical buildings strung out around the lake – including Rysbrack's figure of Hercules within the Pantheon. Turner and Kelsall, it is true, had also considered

the features of the wider estate landscape, especially Alfred's Tower, but the lakeside core of the gardens was their main concern.

Cox's article questioned, as John Dixon Hunt had done in an equally important piece published a few years earlier, whether there was, in reality, any over-arching 'meaning', or even single underlying theme, to the gardens.^{vi} His particular contribution was to consider how Stourhead was described in the many accounts penned by eighteenth-century visitors. Not only do these display no awareness of or interest in any underlying philosophical message. They also make no reference to the *Aeneid* theme. The inscription above the door of the Temple of Flora, for example, received no comment, and was unrecorded by any eighteenth-century illustrator. Visitors failed to progress through the grounds in the manner assumed requisite by modern interpreters. Perhaps most striking, however, is the fact that visitors appear to have been more interested in the walks and drives through the wider estate than in the lake and its temples, aspects of the landscape largely ignored in modern interpretations. They enthused about the great extent of the grounds, the views – especially those from the turf terrace leading to Alfred's Tower - and the disposition of the plantations. It was from this wider landscape that some visitors were able to draw moral lessons, about the Hoare family's role as landowners and their fashionable involvement in improvement. They were also captivated by the outlying gothic buildings, the Convent and Alfred's Tower, responding emotionally to these romantic references to the indigenous, and local, medieval past.

Stourhead, with its balanced combination of classical and gothic buildings displayed in a largely 'naturalistic' setting, is often described as a 'landscape garden', but the terminology of garden history in its treatment of eighteenth-century style remains fundamentally confused, with no clear definitions and making no clear distinction between such designs and the more cluttered, eclectic collections of buildings and structures which constituted what some scholars describe as 'rococo gardens'.^{vii} These were widespread in the 1740s and 50s, often co-existing at the same place with gardens still 'formal' and geometric in style. In 1752 the Earl of Shaftesbury's gardens at Wimbourne St Giles in Dorset typically featured a cascade, a 'thatch'd house', a 'round pavilion' on a mount, 'Shake Spear's House, in which there is a small statue of him', a classical pavilion and both a stone bridge and a 'Chinese Bridge'.^{viii} Even quite small gardens might display a rich diversity. That created by James West at Alscot in Warwickshire in the 1740s – like so many, located at a distance from the mansion and its geometric gardens – contained a Chinese temple, a 'rotunda' on a mound, a cascade, a root house, a Chinese seat, a classical alcove (the only feature still remaining) and 'a cell built for Shakespeare', all laid out around a serpentine path, planted with shrubs.^{ix} The close proximity of the structures and the jumble of styles were both typical. Sir John Parnell memorably described, in 1768, how Philip Southcote's landscape at Woburn Farm in Surrey featured 'a Greek Temple within an hundred yards of a Gothic which comes again as near a Chinese'.^x

The crucial point here, noted by Hunt but more starkly revealed in the descriptions discussed by Cox, is that Stourhead once contained some rather similar structures, and modern responses to its landscape are to a significant extent determined by their disappearance. They included a Turkish Tent, Chinese Pavilion, Gothic Greenhouse, Chinese Umbrella, Hermitage, Chinese Bridge and Venetian Seat. A Mosque was planned, but never built.^{xi} These features not only made Stourhead more like a conventional garden of 'rococo' type, albeit larger and more expensive than most. They must also have provided, at the very least, a context within which the surviving classical structures

were viewed. They would certainly need to be incorporated within any unified reading of the garden's meaning.

What is particularly striking is how Cox's analysis reveals that visitors showed as much interest in the eclectic collection of buildings and structures on the approach to the lake, or interspersed with the enduring classical buildings beside it, as they did in the latter. All, together with the various views within the grounds and the outlying buildings, they described as a series of unconnected, if pleasing, incidents, rather than as parts of a single narrative or theme. In one sense, this provides hard evidence for Hunt's earlier contention that Stourhead presented visitors:

With a host of architectural objects, inscriptions that are quotations from Virgil ... gothic structures and other inscriptions that reference Anglo-Saxon history, and many more such inventions - all set more or less harmoniously but at different times into a contrived landscape scenery. Any one, or any cluster, or all of these together can trigger visitors' imaginations, drawing upon their previous knowledge or their instinct for story-telling; but none of them can *control* what those responses would be.^{xii}

But the descriptions discussed by Cox indicate that many visitors had rather less sophisticated, more immediate responses than is perhaps suggested by Hunt's measured emphasis on 'association', implying as it does a degree of knowledge and contemplation. They bring to mind Tim Mowl's description of such gardens as places designed to create 'a frisson of excitement in visitors, to transport them pleasantly into a fantasy realm for an hour or two', with the larger and most visited examples resembling 'the Alton Towers and the Disneylands of their time, offering harmless, interactive, psychic thrills.'^{xiii} The structures and objects at such places, as well as exotic planting, were intended to evoke an emotional as much as an intellectual response: perhaps to encourage political or philosophical musing, as at Stowe, but more certainly to arouse thoughts of distant places, and reactions of surprise, melancholy or delight. They promoted discussion and conversation, in the manner illustrated by the accounts penned by Stourhead's visitors. For the latter did not normally proceed through the grounds alone, in solitary meditation, but in groups, and they were often more interested in the antics of others than in the various sights and structures on display.

Although some gardens of this broad type and period had a unifying theme this did not necessarily involve complex iconography or subtle allusion. Against the apparent sophistication of Stowe we might place the elaborate garden that Jonathan Tyers (proprietor of the Vauxhall pleasure gardens) created from 1734 at Denbies in Surrey, crudely focused on the theme of mortality, with its gloomy wood dissected by *allées* which terminated at human skulls, and its temple with a clock which struck every minute:

One stroke succeeding another just as the sound of the former is dying away; incessantly admonishing us that Time is fleeting, and even the least portion of it is to be employed in reflections of Eternity.^{xiv}

But humour, as much as philosophy, is evident at many such places. At Seaton Delavel in County Durham one visitor noted in 1752 how the gardens contained 'Some sheep ... plac'd up and down, which would deceive almost anybody till very near them'.^{xv}

Cox's analysis effectively highlights the dangers of modern over-interpretation: the problems with readings of past landscapes born primarily of the particular intellectual obsessions of those steeped

in a range of modern approaches in literature, art history or cultural theory, rather than being firmly based on the evidence of contemporary experience. Yet Cox's article does more than crudely oppose modern interpretations of Stourhead, with contemporary accounts, in order to find the former wanting. It reminds us that there are and were many possible readings of, and interactions with, a designed landscape, and that the relationships between them are complex and often uncertain. They include the intentions - themselves perhaps complex and multiple, conscious and unconscious - of its owner and designers; the understandings and experiences of contemporary visitors; those of subsequent, successive generations, as the garden matured and in its decline; and those of different kinds of visitor; as well as the reactions and interpretations of modern scholars. The problems arise when these varied engagements are confused and conflated, for their motivations and their cultural contexts are radically different. Modern intellectuals engaging with Stourhead do what they often do when considering the cultural products of the past: search for deep meanings, assume that the design is structured by some unified underlying principle. Most eighteenth-century tourists did what most tourists always do, enjoyed the physicality and the direct experience of the individual features of the grounds, commented on the crowds and the weather.

Yet this in turn, should we wish to play Devil's advocate, raises the question of whether there is a danger here of conflating the responses to Stourhead of two distinct groups, those who visited soon after its main features were created, in the 1740s and 50s, and those who came several decades later. For in some ways Stourhead is an anomaly. The kind of garden of which it is an example - serpentine and irregular in layout and filled with buildings and structures - reached the height of its popularity in the 1740s and 50s, before giving way to the more expansive and minimalist naturalism of Capability Brown and his 'imitators'. While entirely new gardens on these lines were rarely created after the 1760s, a number of existing ones persisted and were visited by eager tourists.^{xvi} They included Hagley in Worcestershire, Painshill in Surrey and Stourhead itself, where the Hermitage was added in 1771 and Watch Cottage in 1782, and the Grotto extensively rebuilt in 1776. As Cox notes, it was only in the 1770s that the Stourhead gardens came to be widely known 'beyond a limited coterie of aristocratic garden enthusiasts', and indeed, almost all the descriptions quoted in the article post-date 1770. It might, therefore, be argued that they were written by individuals born of a different age, and that some of their reactions - especially their particular interest in the wider estate landscape, and in the spirit of improvement they found manifested there - arguably seem more at home in the 1770s and 80s, than in the period of the garden's initial design.

But a more interesting issue is raised by the article. Cox, like Hunt, successfully demolishes the notion that the gardens at Stourhead were laid out according to some all-embracing iconographic scheme. The very fact, recently made particularly clear in Dudley Dodd's careful study, that the design developed over time, with evident changes in plan on Hoare's part, also militates against the likelihood of any overall symbolic message.^{xvii} Yet this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that some elements of the gardens near the lake were supposed to be 'read' as a reference to the *Aeneid*, forming one of the experiences, associations, to be enjoyed. It is true that none of the visitor's accounts considered by Cox explicitly refers to such an association. And it is also true that the resemblance of the view across the lake to the temple, to Lorraine's *Coast View of Delos* with Aeneas (a painting widely known from its reproduction as an engraving), is not as close as some have suggested. But the temple in the landscape does bear more than a passing resemblance to that in the painting and, as Dodds has noted, Virgil was Hoare's favourite author and Lorraine his favourite painter (Figures 1 and 2).^{xviii} Allusion does not require photographic accuracy, or anything

approaching it, and the broad visual similarities need to be considered in the context of the inscription above the door of the Temple of Flora, as well as that in the Grotto. At the very least, it would be surprising if Malin's identification of the view, with the painting, had not been anticipated by some eighteenth-century visitors. To reject the possibility that such a reference was intended (and again let me emphasise, as one of many associations within the gardens) on the grounds that surviving descriptions fail to acknowledge it comes close to saying that landscapes, the most sensory of artforms, can only be understood through the medium of texts.

Cox thus invites us to consider the contrast between what might be characterised as an essentially *historical* approach to the cultural products of the past, and an *archaeological* one. The former attempts to recover meaning through an examination of texts and documents, especially – in the case of designed landscapes – explicit statements of design intent and contemporary accounts of the reactions and interpretations of visitors. The latter begins with physical realities - with such things as the layout of planting, the form of built structures and the character of the spatial relationships between them, the opening up or closing off of views and prospects. It then attempts to elucidate meaning by considering the design in its wider social context, and through comparison and analogy with other cultural products of the same society. Moving back in time such an approach becomes increasingly problematic, in part because the form of the garden under investigation is often less certain, in part because its wider social and cultural context is more alien and contested. Hence, in part, the debates about the very existence of large-scale medieval landscape design.^{xix} But even our readings of the meaning of particular eighteenth-century landscapes, where direct textual evidence is absent, often lack intellectual rigour and an explicit theoretical or methodological framework through which competing claims might be tested.

This is important because, while Cox's article demonstrates clearly how contemporary descriptions can tell us much about a garden's meaning, they may not present the whole story. As he emphasises, the accounts of visitors were themselves structured by conventions of genre and language, and by social norms and expectations. They are also highly partial. Some kinds of visitor were more likely to commit their activities in, or responses to, a garden to paper than others; some activities, and responses, were more likely to be recorded than others. As a consequence we may receive too 'polite' an impression of 'polite society' as it wandered through these places. Philip Southcote was memorably obliged to close his gardens at Woburn Farm after 'savages, who came as connoisseurs, scribbled a thousand brutalities in the buildings.'^{xx} Those excluded from the ranks of the 'polite' altogether, moreover, might relate to designed landscapes in quite different ways, seeing them as symbols of exclusion and privilege, for example. In 1749 the steward at Alscot – busy organising the enclosure of the parish - described to his master, with evident horror, how unknown individuals had recently broken into the gardens, 'gone into the root house and thrown what was there into the river; and pull'd up and torn all to pieces my Lady's root seat . . . on the hill in the Long Vistoe next the fir grove'.^{xxi} There were, indeed, many possible responses to these landscapes.

Oliver Cox's article does more than demonstrate how our understanding of a particular garden can be transformed through the simple act of considering what contemporaries actually said about it. Indeed, it does more than establish, beyond reasonable doubt, that there was no single, all embracing 'meaning' to the gardens at Stourhead – a view accepted, at least tacitly, in Dodd's recent, comprehensive study of the place.^{xxii} It suggests that no garden can ever have a single meaning, or even a single range of meanings. Whether what are arguably the most important, those

in the minds of its creators, are always recoverable in their entirety from texts; and if not, how far they can be recovered from the mute landscape itself; are questions worth pondering.

ⁱ Dudley Dodd, *Stourhead: Henry Hoare's Paradise Revisited* (London: Apollo, 2021).

ⁱⁱ Edward Malins, *English Landscape and Literature 1660-1840* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp.49-56.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenneth Woodbridge, 'Henry Hoare's paradise', *Art Bulletin*, 47/1 (1965), pp. 83-116; *idem*, 'The sacred landscape', *Apollo* 88 (1968), pp. 210-214; *idem*, *Landscape and Antiquity: Aspects of English Culture at Stourhead, 1718 to 1838* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

^{iv} Ronald Paulson, *Emblem and Expression: Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), pp. 28-31; Michael Charlesworth, 'Movement, intersubjectivity and mercantile morality at Stourhead' in Michel Conan (ed.), *Landscape, Design and the Experience of Motion* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2003), pp. 263-85; *idem*, 'On meeting Hercules in Stourhead garden', *Journal of Garden History*, 9/2 (1989), pp. 71-5; Max F. Schulz, 'The circuit walk of the eighteenth-century landscape garden and the pilgrim's circuitous progress', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15/1 (1981), pp. 1-25; James Turner, 'The structure of Henry Hoare's Stourhead', *Art Bulletin*, 61/1 (1979), pp. 68-77.

^v Malcolm Kelsall, 'The iconography of Stourhead', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 46 (1983), pp. 133-43.

^{vi} John Dixon Hunt, 'Stourhead revisited and the pursuit of meaning in gardens', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 26/4 (2006), pp. 328-41.

^{vii} Tim Mowl, *An Insular Rococo: Architecture, Politics and Society in Ireland and England, 1710-70* (London: Reaktion, 1999), pp. 72-87; Michael Symes, *The English Rococo Garden* (Princes Risborough: Shire, 1991).

^{viii} James Cartwright (ed.), *The Travels through England of Dr Richard Pococke*, 2 vols (London, 1888), vol. ii, pp. 137-8.

^{ix} Alscot House archives: boxes 2, 6 and 35; map of c. 1749, uncatalogued.

^x James Sambrook, 'Wooburn Farm in the 1760s', *Garden History*, 7 (1979), pp. 82-101; at p. 94.

^{xi} Dodd, *Stourhead*; Tim Mowl, *Gentlemen and Players: Gardeners of the English Landscape* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), pp. 144-5.

^{xii} Hunt, 'Stourhead Revisited', p. 332.

^{xiii} Mowl, *Insular Rococo*, p.80; Mowl, *Gentlemen and Players*, p.146

^{xiv} Nicholas Penny, 'The macabre garden at Denbies and its monument', *Garden History*, 3/3 (1975), pp. 58-61.

^{xv} Norfolk Record Office, MC 40/101.

^{xvi} David Brown and Tom Williamson, *Lancelot Brown and the Capability Men: Landscape Revolution in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Reaktion, 2016) pp. 195-203.

^{xvii} Dodd, *Stourhead*, p.140.

^{xviii} Dodd, *Stourhead*, p. 37.

^{xix} Robert Liddiard and Tom Williamson, 'There by design? Some reflections on medieval elite landscapes', *Archaeological Journal*, 165 (2008), pp. 520-535.

^{xx} Adrian Tinniswood, *A History of Country House Visiting* (London: Wiley/Blackwell, 1989), p.9.

^{xxi} Alscot House archives, box 2.

^{xxii} Dodd, *Stourhead*, pp. 25 and 40.