Stowe

Stowe, Buckinghamshire, England

Location: 3 miles (4.8 km) northwest of Buckingham, approximately 50 miles (80.5 km) northwest of London

Stowe has one of the most famous 18th-century landscape gardens in England. In particular it helped to develop the naturalized classical landscape garden, later idealized as le jardin anglais. Stowe is significant for many other reasons, too, but especially for the combination and scale of factors involved: the garden alone covers 250 acres (101.2 ha); it was at the forefront of development for over 70 years, involving many leading architects and artists of the time; and it still has the largest collection of 18th-century garden buildings in England.

At Stowe, beginning in 1719, Charles Bridgeman developed one of his first uses of the ha-ha to join the garden to its surroundings in a continuous vista. Thus, the fortified ditch around Home Park allowed garden visitors to overlook cattle grazing in the enclosed park with little visual barrier. Lord Petre remarked in 1724 that the replacement of walls by the ha-ha "leaves you the sight of a bewitchful woody Country, and makes you ignorant how far the high planted walks extend." In this way the new landscape garden formed a "landscape" around the house, stretching from the garden itself out into the neighboring countryside, just as the villas and temples of Rome and Greece seemed to nestle within their own pastoral settings. The natural successor of Stowe's Home Park, almost enclosed with a ha-ha and garden walks by 1727, was the ferme ornée, such as Philip Southcote later developed at Woolburn (Surrey, England) from 1734.

If Stowe is famous for its early use of the ha-ha, so important for the setting of landscape gardens, it is also important for an even more significant change within the garden. Once the countryside could easily be seen from within a garden, it was soon realized that the old formal layouts did not suit the wild nature outside its boundary. Thus, in Horace Walpole's memorable phrase, William Kent led the second revolution in landscape design: "He leaped the fence and saw all nature was a garden." "Nature," it was now assumed, "abhors a straight line." By 1734 Sir Thomas Robinson described Kent's new notion as laying out a garden "without either level or line." He added that Stowe, like a few other gardens, was now full of laborers modernizing the expensive works only just finished. At this time the valley below the parish church was being turned into the exquisite Elysian Fields. The scale there is much smaller than Home Park to the west or Hawkwell Field to the east, both enclosed by an inward-facing ha-ha. During the 1740s Lord Cobham and Lancelot "Capability" Brown, for ten years his head gardener at Stowe, went on to develop this principle on a far larger scale in the Grecian Valley to the north. In turn, from 1751 after leaving Stowe, Capability Brown went on to export elsewhere this ideal of the English landscape garden, with its sweeping lawns of grass and carefully positioned clumps and belts of trees and shrubs, punctuated by sinuous lakes and eye-catching buildings.

As a landscape garden Stowe has always been noted more for its trees and shrubs than for smaller flowers. Many of the garden trees were new introductions to England, such as the large maidenhair tree (Ginkgo biloba) beside the Grecian Valley. Some of Brown's fine old cypresses, cedars, and acacias survived into the 1830s, although by this time the garden was not keeping pace with the nurseries in new and rare plants. The cedar of Lebanon (Cedrus libani), surviving close to the Temple of Ancient Virtue, must also date from Lord
Cobham's time. He was the major plantsman at Stowe, although in the 19th century the first duke of Buckingham and Chandos brought in James Brown as gardener, and the third duke replaced many trees lost in his father's sales. By 1989, however, only 5 percent of the garden's trees were more than 70 years old. The original trees were carefully sited—Brown was famous for his machine, probably first used at Stowe, to move semimature trees; in 1770 plantations of deciduous trees were set behind borders of predominantly evergreen trees and shrubs such as laurels, hollies, and magnolias. Not all tree types have continued to be planted at Stowe: the original elms, for instance, which formed the avenues on the Straight Course and Stowe Avenue, have had to be replaced with other species.

Beyond the garden lay the Northern Park, including part of Stowe Woods, a much earlier layout of rides unconnected with the garden. They were important for the income generated by the timber and for the vistas from the garden. During the 19th century the Northern Park became home to the Bucks Yeomanry when the first duke created a new park to the south of the garden. He built a gentle carriage drive through part of the Southern Park as a short cut to Earl Temple's spectacular approach from his Corinthian Arch to his Oxford Bridge. The marquess added a large walled kitchen garden at Dadford; it was later updated extravagantly, but only for a few years, by the second duke.

The 70 years that it took Lord Cobham and Earl Temple to create most of the garden and park, together with their great wealth and personal interest, meant that they were able to call on many of the leading architects of landscape and buildings of that time. Thus, Bridge- man, Vanbrugh, Gibbs, Kent, Leoni, Brown, Miller, Borra, William Pitt, Blondel, Thomas Pitt, Robert and James Adam, and Vald'ré all supplied advice or plans. Subsequently, other well-known names have been drawn to Stowe, such as Soane, Blomfield, Lorimer, and Fielding, making its many layers an informative cross section of landscape history and ideas on restoration.

Stowe's unique collection of over 30 neoclassical buildings or temples adorning its landscape can be matched by few other gardens. Under Lord Cobham and, to a slightly lesser extent, Earl Temple, it led the way in several early flowerings of the neoclassical movement. Thus, it could claim two early classical rotodones, a rare rostral column and a trend-setting Grecian temple (now the
Temple of Concord and Victory), however inaccurate in detail at first. This use of innovative buildings has always been one of the most memorable features of Stowe and the one most frequently copied elsewhere. Other original but non-classical features, such as the Egyptian Pyramid, Witch House, and Chinese House, were removed by Earl Temple as he carefully purified the classical nature of the landscape.

The series of temples began, of course, as a play on the Temple family name and motto (tempula quam dilecta—how delightful are thy temples) and developed into a complex iconographical program with clear political messages, especially following Cobham's break with Walpole's Whigs over the Excise Bill in 1733. This feature soon lost significance, but it was replaced by Earl Temple's more widespread iconography of liberty and Bacchus. It was aided in part by the significance of over a dozen paintings decorating the garden buildings, along with their magnificent groups of associated sculpture and dozens of inscriptions, mostly in Latin. The result was a complex set of intellectual and aesthetic experiences rarely matched in other gardens.

Stowe's significance was deliberately enhanced by a series of publications designed to promote the fame of the garden. Publicity was intended from the start, since in 1717 Lord Cobham had the New Inn built on the main route from Buckingham and close to the visitor entrance at Bell Gate. From here was sold the unique series of some 33 editions of the Descriptions started by Benton Seeley in 1744. Even before this, in 1731, Alexander Pope, a friend of Cobham and a frequent visitor to Stowe, had singled out Stowe for praise in his Fourth Epistle, to the Earl of Burlington; the following year Gilbert West had published a whole poem in Stowe's honor. Defoe and Boyce followed with more detailed accounts, and soon Bickham and Wasey competed with Seeley. Meanwhile, in 1733 Rigaud drew and engraved a magnificent series of views of the garden. By 1735 a further three sets of engravings of the grounds and buildings were published, spreading Stowe's influence far abroad. As a result many of Stowe's buildings were soon imitated, with copies from Hagley Park to St. Petersburg.

In the early and middle years of the 18th century, Stowe was renowned as a meeting place for many of the leading literati of the time, including Lord Cobham's Kit-Cat friends such as Vanbrugh and Congreve, Pope, Gay, Swift, West, Lyttelton, Pitt, Hammond, and Thomson. Many of them shared his passion for gardening. The position of Stowe, close to Blenheim and some other north Oxfordshire seats such as Ditchley and Rousham, helped it become part of a regular tour, aided by its proximity to London and to main stagecoach routes.

Stowe's fame as a garden, however, cannot be disassociated from the significance of the family that made Stowe one of the powerhouses at the center of 18th-century British politics. There were four prime ministers connected with the family within the last 50 years or so of the century, and it has been argued that family riots were partly responsible for the loss to Britain of its American colonies. The securities that formed the spoils of high office at the time helped finance the vast expenditure necessary to keep furnishing and rebuilding the house and physically moving over a dozen of the garden buildings.

The family not only sought fame through its house and garden but deliberately aimed at acquiring a dukedom, which they finally did in 1822, just before they lost much of their political influence in the Reform Act. They also achieved the longest surname in the country, quintuple-barreled. The second duke of Buckingham and Chandos could even claim, through his Plantagenet inheritance, a descent from King Henry VII similar in some respects to that of Queen Victoria. At one stage Stowe claimed more visits by royalty than any other private house.

Another factor in Stowe's fame was the family's notorious financial crash just two years after Queen Victoria's visit of 1845. The contents of the house were sold and many trees in the grounds were felled. The money had begun to run out in 1805, however, which meant that much of the important 18th-century garden escaped major change after Earl Temple's death in 1779. The direct male line of the family died out in 1889 and ever greater costs led to the estate's sale in 1921.

The year 1923 saw the foundation of Stowe School, a British public school founded with a distinctive philosophy under J.E. Rosborough, a major figure of 20th-century education in the United Kingdom. The school's first architect, Clough Williams-Ellis, ensured the careful conversion of the building and sympathetic treatment of the grounds. He was personally responsible for helping to save Stowe Avenue. Had the house and grounds not been purchased for the new school, it is probable that the buildings and garden would have been lost. The work of Williams-Ellis at Stowe is particularly interesting, revealing elements of his growing concern for conservation mixed with a delight in siting new buildings in sympathy with the existing landscape, a trait later developed at Portmeirion.

In the fields of restoration and conservation Stowe has often been at the forefront. In 1933 the Stowe School began the first of many campaigns to restore the garden buildings, house, and landscape. In 1954 the school was one of the first private estates to receive government money for the restoration of garden buildings, and in 1985 the National Trust purchased the Oxford Avenue, the first time it acquired property to enhance an estate that it did not own, although the school had given covenants to the National Trust for over 221 acres (90 ha) of the garden in 1967.

The surveys undertaken by the National Trust, following the Stowe School's gift of most of the garden and park in 1989, have set new standards for detail and
thoughness. They included surveys of the garden buildings, archaeology, and botany, as well as a garden survey by land use consultants, leading to a draft management plan in 1993. In parallel scholars of Stowe's history, led by George Clarke, have begun to research the thousands of documents in the Huntington Library in San Marino. These are being entered into a computerized database to facilitate historically accurate restoration of both landscape and buildings. Especially impressive have been the restoration of the Temple of Concord and Victory under the architect Peter Inskip and the transformation of its surrounding landscape of the Grecian Valley. Silt has been removed from eight of the lakes, and many thousands of shrubs and trees have been planted. Even the Chinese House has been returned to Stowe after an absence of over 240 years.

The house, the key garden temple, was transferred to the Stowe House Preservation Trust in 2000 and is planned to be restored in six phases. With generous financial help the result should be that, by the second decade of the 21st century, the garden and house will be in as good a state as at any time since Earl Temple's death in 1779.

1746–49 Lord Cobham, with head gardener, Lancelet “Capability” Brown (employed at Stowe 1741–51), lays out Grecian Valley, with Grecian Temple, Captain Grenville's Column, and Lord Cobham's Pillar

1749-62 Ear Temple continues to naturalize landscape, flattening most inward-facing ha-has around Home Park and Hawkwell Field and moving and altering many buildings with help of Borra; on approach from Oxford, builds Oxford Bridge and adds pair of lodges

1779 Death of Lord Cobham

1779–1813 Marquess of Buckingham adds to approaches, while wife has Menagerie built

1813–39 First duke of Buckingham and Chandos completes physical extent of garden by purchase of Lamport Manor, which he replaces with picturesque rock and water garden; adds Queen’s Drive and Silverstone Lodges

1839–44 Blore adds several lodges for second duke and moves many statues

1862–1922 Third Duke and his descendants replant some avenues

1921 Harry Shaw purchases most of Stowe estate

1922–49 Harry Shaw sells most of Stowe estate to Governors of Stowe School; some Old Etonians save Stowe Avenue; under J.E. Roxburgh, first headmaster, and Williams-Ellis, school's first architect, new buildings sited west of house

1923 Stowe becomes a school

1933 Stowe School starts program of restoration of historic buildings and landscape
Further Reading


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Gewing, C.N., and George Clarke, editors, Drawings of Stowe by John Claude Nattes in the Buckinghamshire County Museum, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire: Buckinghamshire County Museum and Stowe School, 1983

Hall, Michael, “Stowe Landscape Gardens I–II,” Country Life 190 (February 1996)


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Michael J. Bevington

Studley Royal and Fountains Abbey

Studley Royal, North Yorkshire, England

Location: 2.5 miles (4 km) west of Ripon, 25 miles (40 km) north of Leeds, and approximately 190 miles (306 km) north-northwest of London

Studley Royal, Yorkshire, near Ripon, is one of the most perfectly preserved early 18th-century semi-formal or natural gardens in England, together with Hackfall and Kirkby Fleetham, one of three laid out by John Aislabie.