Hidden Landscapes/gardens

Intro

The English countryside today is moulded by designed pastoral landscapes around our great houses. We are so used to seeing their well-spaced trees and grazed slopes that it is easy to forget that so many of them date from the late-eighteenth century. Landscape designer Capability Brown's naturalistic 'improvements' shaped the scene so successfully and became so predominant, that in their maturity today, we hardly remember that such settings were created by design. But in earlier centuries, other ideas held sway for such pleasure grounds, that have been swept away by neglect or shifts in taste.

For the shaping of our landscapes for beauty and pleasure as well as agricultural use, has been a practice for centuries. The landscapes created around great houses were important extensions, either as places of privacy away from the busy domestic spaces of medieval halls, or places for pleasure and entertaining, long before Capability Brown started moving earth, planting trees and making lakes in the mid-eighteenth century.

Landmark cares for some unique remains of these early landscape gardens. Quite often, as great houses were abandoned or razed to the ground and pillaged for stone, the landscapes around them become abandoned too – often used simply for pasture, as the remains of any human activity became buried beneath centuries of soil and any buildings re appropriated for agricultural use. However, it only takes a bit of a detective eye to read the lumps and bumps underfoot and understand the ruinous architecture.

Astley Castle

One of the earliest landscapes that we care for surrounds Astley Castle – the site here has been in continuous occupation since the Saxon period. When first built, the castle stood in a clearing, surrounded by the mighty Forest of Arden. Today, Astley Castle is well known for Landmark's project to save it from complete ruin. In 2014 new contemporary accommodation was stitched into the decaying walls of this historic moated site to combine modern architecture with this ancient place. From the first floor windows of this new space, you can view the key features of the ancient designed landscape that gives the site its essence and identity – the medieval church, the fishing lake, the viewing mound; gateway, curtain walls and moat. In autumn the mists settle on more reluctant ghosts – water courses that topped the moat, small fish ponds and plateaus. Tunnelling moles reveal the outline of the buried foundations of the collegiate church, and with the aid of both aerial photography and ground geophys, the traces of these and other buildings have been mapped.

It was under the Grey family in the late 15th century, that the castle and landscape achieved their most mature form. Records tell us that the Greys enclosed 30 acres of demesne lands around the castle to extend the existing private landscape and create the Little Park that sloped down to a lake to the east - said locally to have been created by quarrying stone for the castle.

The wider estate also provided brief sanctuary for the Duke of Suffolk after he rebelled against Mary I in January 1554. He hid in a hollow oak tree for some time (long enough to have his writing desk delivered to him, it is said) before he was eventually captured. The supposed writing desk is now at neighbouring Arbury Hall.

The earliest surviving plan we have of the designed landscape around Astley Castle is a map from 1696, by which time Astley was owned by the Chamberlain family. The plan clearly shows the Little Park, the Plash – a marshy area between the castle and the medieval pool, an extensive orchard, a covered walkway between the brew house and the curtain wall, and closer to the castle itself the pleasure gardens. These features were centuries old even then.

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The Chamberlain family then sold Astley to the Newdigates of neighbouring Arbury Hall in 1674. The castle was no longer a primary residence, outdated and a lesser priority by the 1750s when the Newdigates concentrated on embellishing Arbury Hall into its Gothick splendour.

As ivy colonised its walls, Astley Castle achieved fame as a picturesque site. It featured in various early travel guides to the area., like A New and Complete History of the County of Warwick in 1829 which informed the visitor that:

> 'a considerable portion of this ancient structure still remains, and the grounds surrounding it being tastefully laid out and kept in good order, render this once magnificent pile of building, still a handsome and grand mansion....in some parts [the] fragments of wall are lofty, but on every side they are crumbled, by time and accident, into forms most favourable to picturesque effect, and are screened by over-hanging ever-green...'

The castle served as inspiration for the young George Eliot, who accompanied her father on his rounds as the Arbury estate's agent. She absorbed the landscape and its people well enough for it to feature years later in Mr Gilfils Love Story. The pleasure gardens around the perimeter of the moat became reabsorbed by the land and grazed by generations of sheep and cattle.

On the moated island itself a series of knot gardens have evolved, and then disappeared. The fashion for knot gardens in the Tudor period led to the creation of a feature that survived at least until the map of 1696. There was a knot garden revival in the early 20th century, led by the Arts & Crafts movement and many locals still remember the box hedging, enclosing a myriad of roses almost perpetually in bloom. In its latest reincarnation, today's knot garden was designed by Kate Heppell as part of Landmark's restoration project, and was planted by volunteers. In the wider landscape, new footpaths now open up access to the remains of the pleasure gardens for visitors and locals alike and are maintained by a sturdy group of local volunteers, as this ancient landscape continues to be enjoyed in the twenty-first century.

Old Campden House

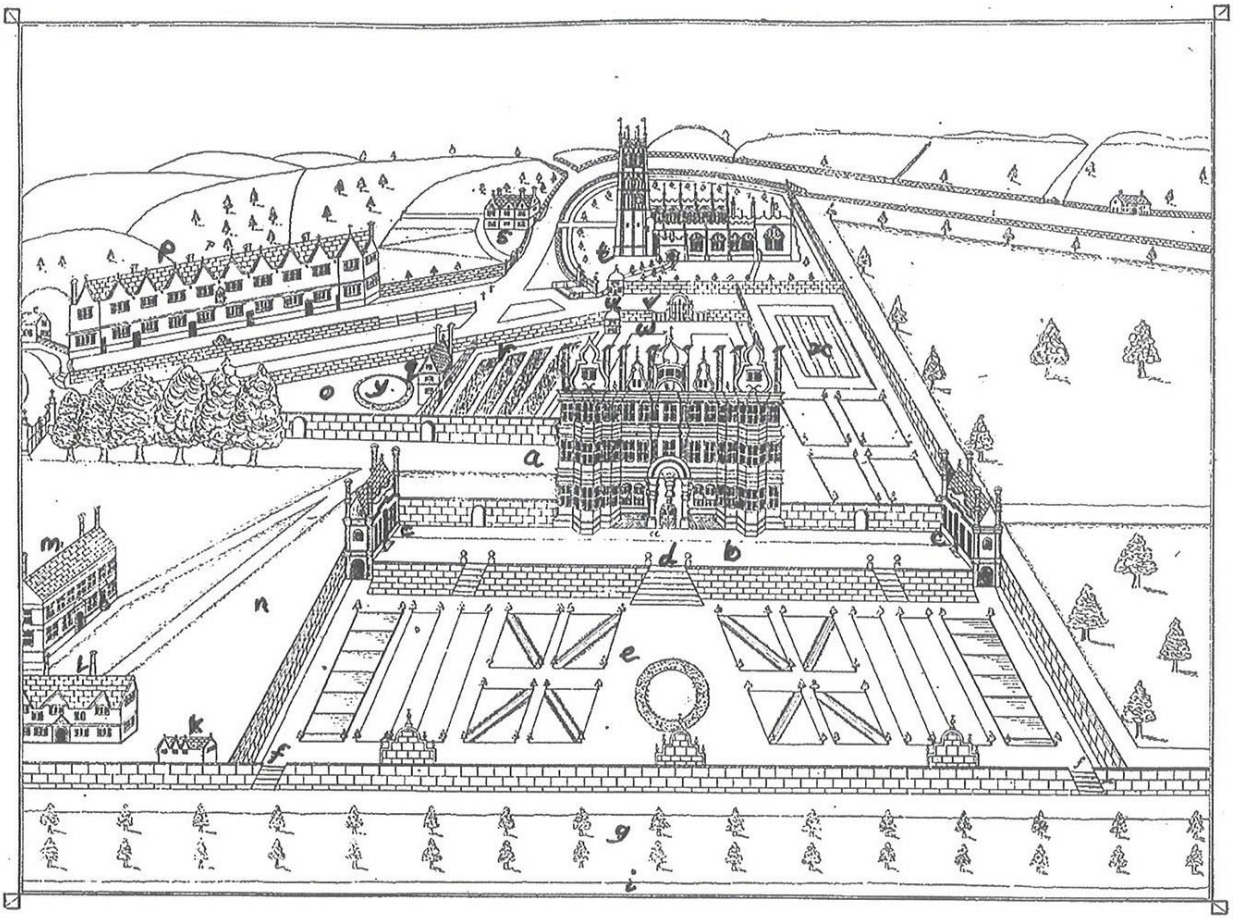
The site of Old Campden House at Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds is a remarkably intact survival of formal Jacobean landscape design, created by, Sir Baptist Hicks from 1613. For three short decades the house and its gardens were a prodigy.

After evening meals guests would retire to two flanking Banqueting Houses, for their 'banquet' (or dessert course) at the end of the meal to drink rare wines, eat dried fruit and sweetmeats. Each Banqueting House, east and west was as beautiful and captivating as the parent house with exuberant strapwork parapets and barley sugar twist chimneys. Their windows gave a prospect across the formal parterre, fading through orchards to the Cotswold hills beyond.

The splendor was short-lived. In 1643, 'this howse that was so faire' was burnt down by a retreating Royalist garrison in 1643 during the Civil War. Today, only banqueting houses, gate lodges and a little pavilion now known as the Almonry remain. Just a small section of the house stands, a haggard memento to what was once there, left untouched by the townsfolk, who took the rest of its stones for their own building projects.

An archaeological site of the greatest importance lies just beneath the turf on the site. The firing of the mansion so soon after its construction means that an early seventeenth century garden lies intact and fossilized. As ever, aerial photography reveals a lot. If soaring high when shadows are long, you can see the lumps and bumps in the ground and without too much imagination make out hollows where water once stood.

Hicks carried out extensive landscaping to improve the natural lie of the land and create a parterre below his great house to the south, overlooked from a terrace and flanked by raised walkways. The main parterre had a star of paths radiating from the centre to its corners and sides. At its lower end, the main parterre gives way to steep terracing that falls away, originally to an ornamental canal with water parterres at either corner. The east water parterre, is still identifiable as a square pond with four symmetrical pools circling a central 'island', once accessible by diagonal pathways. The western parterre, eroded by later agricultural use, is no longer recognisable.



BIRDSEYE VIEW OF CAMPDEN HOUSE, BURNT DOWN IN THE YEAR OF NASEBY, 1645 (from an old drawing).

References—a The house. b The terrass walk. c The banquiting house. d The garden staires. e The great garden. f The orchart staires. g The great orchart. i The long canal. k The coach-house. l The brew-house. m The stables. n The stable court. o The henn yard. p The hospital. q The laundry. r The bleach garden. s The parsonage house. t The church. u The porter's lodge. v The outward court. w The great court. x The garden court. y The pond.

At the far south eastern corner of the site is a viewing mound, from which a sally (or reed) bed once stretched to a stone culvert in the middle of the Coneygree, an enclosed warren and coursing ground to the east. This culvert was part of the sophisticated water supply system for the site, which began with the conduit house on Conduit/Westington Hill. The remnants of lead pipes were found during the restoration works., no doubt feeding garden fountains as well as the main house.

Gardening was a passion of the day, with garden plans and plants and discussed just as much as plans for great houses. New species from the New World were status symbols in the great gardens of the day. The crown imperial lily, tulips, Turk's Cap lilies, fritillaries, candytuft, laburnum, sunflowers, evening primrose, nasturtium, lilacs, ranunculas, and Michaelmas daisies were all introduced during the period and might have been found in Campden alongside native species, as Hicks sought to create one of the finest gardens of his day. Today we must use our imagination, but the uniquely surviving earthworks make it still possible to appreciate the drama and conceits of an early 17th century garden.

Swarkestone Pavilion

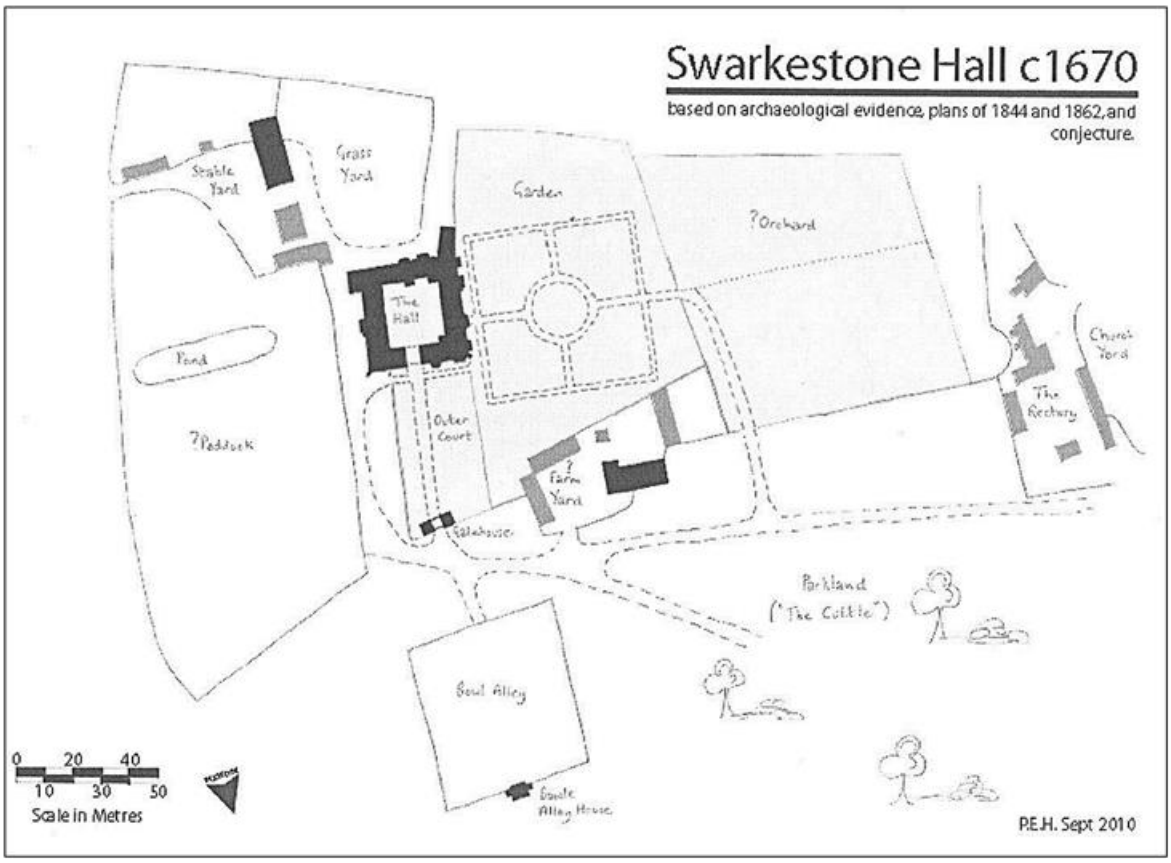
The little Derbyshire village of Swarkestone, with its important bridge across the river Trent, has seen great events: a battle for its control in the Civil War did great damage to the Hall; and in 1745 it was the point at which Bonnie Prince Charlie turned his troops back towards Scotland to meet their fate at Culloden, as he recognised the futility of his attempt on the English throne. Today a pretty Jacobean pavilion stands as sole witness to the splendour of former ages.

Originally this tiny pavilion belonged to Swarkestone Hall, a great house demolished by 1750. And like the Banqueting Houses at Campden it is a mature expression in miniature of all that was best in Tudor and Jacobean architecture – and most probably strongly suggestive of how the vanished house may have been styled.

For a long time little was known about the Swarkestone Pavilion; neither its precise date, nor its designer, nor its place in the wider arrangement of house - the vanished Swarkestone Hall, and garden. Even its name has varied according to differing opinions of its original purpose - variously the Stand or Grandstand, the Summerhouse or even the Bullring.

The excuse for building it was to give a grandstand view of whatever went on in the walled enclosure in front of it. Suggestions for what went on range from the romantic, such as jousting, to the bloodthirsty such as bear-baiting or stag hunting. The truth is most likely is that it overlooked a bowling green, whose outline can still grin through in dry weather. A set of accounts for 1631-2 include payment of £111 12s 4d to Richard Shepperd as the mason for `New Buildynge', together with a sum for `Boardes' for the `Bowle Alley house'. There seems every reason to identify these entries with the pavilion. The accounts also dispell the bloodthirsty mythology that had grown up around the Pavilion, and establish it as belonging not to the activities of the wider park like hunting, but to the gentler pleasures of a formal garden.

Richard Shepperd may have built the pavilion, but its design has been attributed to John Smythson, one of our first true architects and son of Robert, who built many notable houses in the Elizabethan era. All this makes it a building well worth preserving as sole remnant of a vanished great house, as well as a romantic Landmark to visit and stay in.



Suggested layout of the Swarkestone Hall site in the mid-17th century, based on surviving features, archaeological evidence and 19th-century plans (South Derbyshire District Council). Key buildings are shown in black including the conjectured footprint of Swarkestone Hall.

Few buildings and their landscapes make Rock and Roll History, but Swarkstone gained an element of notoriety when in 1968, as a suitably derelict shell surrounded by unkempt grass, it was used by the Rolling Stones to promote their album *Beggar's Banquet*. Another image from the same photoshoot was used on the back of a later compilation album, *Hot Rocks 1964-1971*. A quick google search also reveals that they attempted a game of cricket in front of the pavilion – not that far from honouring the original purpose of this building and its landscape.

Our final building takes us right up to the birth of the English Landscape Movement and the widespread erasure of many earlier garden features it required.

Knowle Hill

Like many properties rescued by the Landmark Trust, Knowle Hill in Derbyshire is a fragment, an intriguing memory of something once larger and finer. The fragment here is not just of a building, but also of a most interesting garden. Two valleys converge at Knowle Hill, where we have the remains of a garden created around 1700.

It was created by Walter Burdett, a former London barrister who retired to his family's country estates in 1686.. In 1701, he moved into a new house he had built for himself at Knowle Hill, on the western side of a little valley. Its natural features provided the perfect canvas for Burdett's landscape ambitions.

In 1712 William Wooley, in a manuscript of his *History of Derbyshire*, described Knowle Hill as:

> 'A place of a peculiar pleasant and retired situation where a hermit in old times would have chosen to have made his cell. Mr Walter Burdett, an elderly bachelor of the ancient family, has made a very agreeable habitation, suitable to his humour and circumstances, where two knowles or hills covered with woods and two pleasant valleys on each side, with two murmuring rivulets running along them, to which natural disposition he has added a great deal of art which renders a most delightful place which, with his kind hospitality, causeth it to be much resorted to.'

The garden that Burdett in the closing years of the 17th century was certainly formal in style – much more formal than it appears today. It is an important, and curious garden which was directly influenced by the Italian Renaissance in its original form and layout.

In the early 17th century the English had fallen under the spell of Italian gardens, both those described by classical poets like Pliny and Virgil, but also those which were created in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, like those at Tivoli.

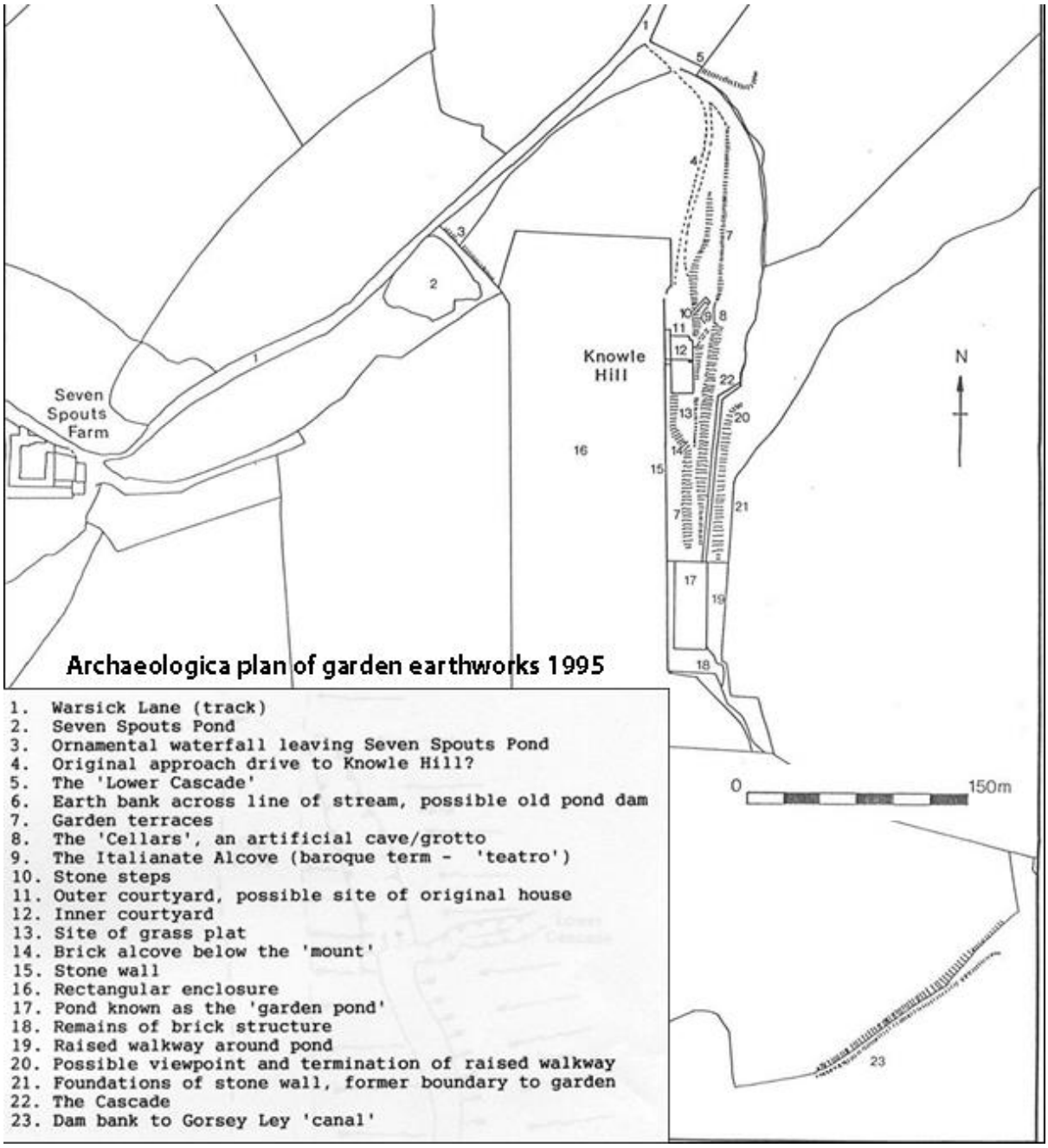
A key element in the Italian Renaissance garden was variety. This was provided both by movement between different levels and through contrasting areas, containing here a formal garden layout, there a 'natural' wood or grove intersected by walks. Statues, fountains, arbours and grottoes added further elements of surprise and delight. Equally important were opportunities for views over the surrounding countryside, whether cultivated or wild, with which the outer areas of the garden could blend. Significantly, Italian gardens of this type could be realised on a modest scale and within a relatively constrained area.

Then, after the accession of Mary II and her Dutch husband William of Orange and with the splendour of the Sun King's Versailles setting the bar the fashion veered towards the French-Dutch variations of the formal garden. There might still be a terrace, but the design was more uniform and, the gardens larger. The grandest examples sought to impose order on the outside world, rather than leave it as a foil to the artistry contained within.

Such gardens were immortalised by the artists Leonard Knyff and Johannes Kip in *Britannia Illustrata*, published in 1707, which reproduced engravings of country houses and their grounds from all over England. Complex floral parterres, geometric canals, fountains, arbours, banqueting houses, mounts were all contained within the walled gardens of the English elite, and were usually surrounded by a deer park criss-crossed with a mesh of avenues.

Despite the change in fashions, the Italian strand of garden design did not entirely vanish. Instead, it continued as a minor theme, throughout the early 1700's, later to be taken up again and developed by designers such as William Kent and Alexander Pope. Many such gardens were later absorbed into

more grandiose Baroque layouts or swept away in the ruthless re-landscaping of the later Georgians as the English Landscape Movement spread far and wide. Knowle Hill on the other hand was simply allowed to decay.



Even in its decayed state, we can see that Walter Burdett's garden fell into the Italian pattern, by nature of its terraces and cascade, its views and the way it fits in with what Woolley called the 'natural disposition' of its setting. The natural landscape was allowed to blend evocatively with the more formal layout of terraces and pools, to conjure up an Elysian world in miniature. Classical

statuary was an essential ingredient of such gardens, carrying a range of ideological and mythological meanings for Walter and his guests, but sadly none remains today.

Nor can we be sure of the planting or the formal arrangements of paths and flowerbeds – though the owner in 1735 declares it then to be 'guiltless of parterre'. The later history of the site, and in particular its ownership by the Forestry Commission, means that the original planting scheme of Walter's garden is difficult to reconstruct and for the visitor to imagine. Certainly, the planting would have been much more formal, and the landscape as a whole less wooded, than today. There is some evidence to suggest that the terraces were lined with yew trees, but beech and lime are also mentioned in early accounts of the gardens. Around the rectangular pond are alders, oaks and beeches which are probably 19th-century in date, but perhaps the descendants of the original planting scheme.

The Italian Alcove *(or exedra)*, set within the terraces, is a semi-circular structure with traces of alcoves within it which may have been the setting for classical statues. Immediately below the alcove is the entrance to an underground chamber, which has been interpreted as being a grotto, entered through a brick tunnel which emerges into a sandstone chamber incorporating various alcoves and seats, with further chambers and tunnels leading some 25 metres into the hillside.

In Walter's lifetime the grotto added excitement for those exploring the garden, and a space for contemplation. Grottos were also commonly used for allegorical scenes in their decoration. This might be statues set amongst exotic minerals, stones and shells, often with a fountain, or even go as far as a moving display powered by hydraulics. There is little within the chamber now to suggest how Burdett decorated his own grotto, and it remains rather enigmatic in terms of its original purpose.

On his death in 1732, Walter Burdett left Knowle Hill to his niece, Jane Hopegood. She sold it soon after to a young man named Nicholas Hardinge, who had local connections but worked in London, where he was Clerk to the House of Commons. Until his death in 1758 he used Knowle Hill as a retreat, and wrote long poems praising its idyllic qualities. Then, in 1766, Knowle Hill was bought by Walter's great-nephew, Sir Robert Burdett of Foremark. He demolished the main house. In its place, possibly over some former stables, he built a custodian's cottage, and a Gothick summerhouse, which soared like a ruined castle on the valley's edge and survives today. Walter Burdett's house, which rose up the slope from the valley floor, and apparently resembled an Italianate structure of terraces and steps, with a mysterious rock-cut chamber in its midst, was left as an intriguing classical ruin. Knowle Hill was now a pleasure garden, to be visited for picnics and other light-hearted excursions. In the 19th century it became a popular resort for people from nearby towns. The sense of mystery and decay was strong, but attractively so.

In 1854 Dr Robert Bigsby wrote that 'Knowle Hills is a favourite place of resort through the summer, through the charms which its recluse beauties afford to the lovers of the picturesque' and it became a popular destination for outings. In 1869, Dr Spencer Hall gave a vivid description in his *Days in Derbyshire*:

> 'We soon came to a spouting spring, giving the name of Seven Spouts to a farm-stead close by; and a little further on, we saw an enormous beech, lying prostrate by a lone pool, evidently thrown down by a recent storm; and there was a strange old world gloom about the whole scene, deepening at every step we took. A camp of gipsies; sheep at rest under a large old thorn; rocks cropping out of the wayside slopes, and plumed with dark firs and

other trees, and many kindred features of rural solitude, had caught our minds by the way, before we came to that lone pool and prostrate tree. But this seemed on the threshold of a scene more solitary and silent still; when, suddenly, from the thick screen of trees before us, came the sounds, not only of numerous human voices - voices of mirth and glee - but of musical instruments, awakening the echoes with tones anything but ancient, though very harmonious, and corresponding to moods of mind the reverse of pensive and gloomy. We were now at a gate leading to the site of what was once the mansion of Knoll Hills; and among its vestiges were gathered on the day of our visit a Baptist sabbath-school party, from Willington, and a pleasure-party from Derby - the former accompanied by their chapel choir, and the latter by a spirited and well-organised quadrille band! Waggons, flys, carts and gigs, decorated with flags, were there, about which climbed and played merrily a number of children; the Derby party were having a dance upon a lawn; the Sunday-school teachers were taking tea in a dwelling made of part of the outbuildings of the old mansion; refreshments were supplied for those who had not made other arrangements by an innkeeper from Repton.'

Knowle Hill continued to be lived in by tenants, but the woods on the estate were all leased to the Forestry Commission. By the 1950's, the woodland had been cleared or felled and new plantations were created, mainly of conifer, with the occasional stand of poplar or notofagus, the South American beech. Vegetation and decay blurred and swallowed the remaining structures of Walter Burdett's Italianate landscape

In Landmark's care since 1993, many of these conifers have now been cleared to allow the original form and vistas of the designed landscape to be more easily understood. Water still trickles through the valley, paths are there to be discovered and plinths and ledges provide places for living statues to be captured on camera.

Conclusion

These four hidden landscapes represent lost periods of landscape development and obsession that long pre-date the now dominant and well documented practice of the English Landscape Movement led by Capability Brown. These earlier landscapes were also the work of passionate individuals, with energy and imagination equal to, if not finer than, that of later designers. Even though few examples of their creations remain intact, their work and endeavors should not be underestimated. And where ghosts of their landscapes remain, their shapes and forms still provide us with places for escape, pleasure and adventure.