

Mill Wood, Halswell House, Goathurst, Somerset (ST23SE)
House Grade I; Landscape Park Grade II

In 1989 Gervase Jackson-Stops declared that the landscape of Halswell House then in a 'sad state of decay...should one day rival its younger neighbour [Hestercombe] as a place of pilgrimage for garden historians.'¹ In the intervening quarter of a century only the most determined and opportune pilgrim would have been successful in gaining access to all the features and vistas afforded by the landscape park where the skills of Robert Adam, Francis Cartwright, John Johnson, Thomas Prowse, Thomas Stocking, John Walsh, Jacob de Wilstar and Thomas Wright are attributed as being directly or indirectly applied. During the 44 years of his ownership Sir Charles Kemys-Tynte, (1710 -1785), worked assiduously, as his diaries reveal, to improve and extend the Halswell parkland whose merits were praised by illustrious visitors including William Gilpin, Henry Hawkins Tremayne and Horace Walpole.

Such acclaim was not sufficient to protect Halswell from the ravages of time. Although it is likely that the main house would have disappeared altogether had it not been divided into multiple ownership in the 1960s subsequent attempts to reverse this process have proved unviable and today the house is boarded up, its Administrators hamstrung by the aforementioned fragmentation of title. The stepped pyramid adjacent to the house remains in reasonable condition but a short distance away the *tempietto* known as 'Mrs Busby's Temple on the Lawn' and a rockwork screen below the pond to the east of the house, both attributed to Thomas Wright², are fast deteriorating to the condition from which they were rescued within the past decade.

In the late 1980s/early 1990s two other notable but near-derelect follies in the wider parkland were rescued by the Somerset Historic Buildings Preservation Trust which acquired and fully restored the buildings before entrusting the future safekeeping of

Robin Hood's Hut (Grade II*) and the Temple of Harmony (Grade II*) to the Landmark Trust³ and the especially formed Halswell Park Trust (HPT), respectively. HPT's long-term aim has always been to acquire and preserve the beauties of Halswell Park as opportunities arose, restoring and maintaining public access. Visitors to the Temple standing on its grassy curtilage might be unaware how tantalisingly close they were to the jewel in Halswell's crown, the hidden pleasure garden located in the comb known as Mill Wood. Nowadays the Temple appears isolated following extensive tree felling in the 1950s but it was always intended to be an integral part of Mill Wood's pre-existing Picturesque design (Fig: 1) and this is confirmed in the vivid description published in 1771:

From hence the riding leads down the hill to a wood of noble oaks, which shade a spot beautifully wild and sequestered, where a limpid spring rises at the foot of a rock overhung in a fine bold manner by wood growing from its clefts. The water winds away through the grove in a proper manner....Turning the corner you catch a bridge, under a thick shade, and then come to the Druid's Temple, built, in a just stile, of bark, &c, the view quite gloomy and confined: the water winds silently along, except a little gushing fall, which hurts not the emotions raised by so sequestered a scene. Following the path towards the bridge, you catch, just before you come to it, a little landscape through the trees, of distant water, finely united with wood. From the bridge the river appears to great advantage, noisily embanked on one side with tall spreading trees, and on the other with green slopes, in which single ones are scattered. From these retired and gloomy spots you leave the dark groves, and open into a more cheerful ground; the river is bounded only on one side of thick wood, and on the other side by waving lawns open to the fields, and scattered thinly with trees. From a bench on the banks you view a slight fall of water well shaded.

Advancing, the character of the ground changes again most happily; the woods open on both sides [sic]the water; waving lawns of the most lively verdure - trees thinly scattered - brighter streams- touches of distant prospect - and elegant buildings - all unite to raise the most cheerful ideas, which were prepared for, by gradually leaving the gloom of the more sequestered woods. A break through the trees to the right, lets in a view of the rotunda.

Passing to the *Ionic* portico, which is excellently placed, the scenery in view is truly enchanting; the lawn is gently waved, and spotted with trees and shrubs in the happiest taste. The water seems to wind naturally through a falling vale; and a swelling hill, crowned by a rotunda, forms a complete picture. The whole scene is really elegant; every part is riant, and bears the stamp of pleasure.

As you cross the bridge, you look to the right on a very beautiful cascade, which makes five or six slight falls over a moss and ivy bank, under a dark shade of wood. The slopes, wood and water, unite to render the scene striking. But the point of view being the bridge, and standing on another cascade, is not agreeable; it somewhat weakens the effect.

Turning down by the water the lawn continues very beautiful, and you gain a fine view of the *Ionic* portico on a rising slope, which here appears to great advantage; but the middle cascade, which you here command, should be totally hid, it is an inferior repetition of the principal one.

Rising the hill by the side of the water, you have from a bench under a spreading wood an agreeable view of a bridge, and a little further, another commands the same object, and has also a very pleasing opening through the trees to the portico. The view to the left of the water is a confirmation of *Shenstone's* observation.

The riding which follow a on the bank of the river under the gloomy shade of numerous most venerable trees, is a fit residence for Contemplation to dwell in. The opening across the water on the opposite lawn, are just sufficient to heighten by contrast. The awful shade - the solemn stillness of the scene, broken by nothing but the fall of distant waters; have altogether a great effect, and impress upon the mind a melancholy scarcely effaced by the cheerful view of a rich vale with the water winding through, which is seen on crossing the park towards the house.⁴

A nineteenth-century map (Fig:2) records the density of woodland and follies and for pilgrims so far unsuccessful in gaining access, the map traces how the spring-fed stream flows from the grotto, feeding a series of ornamental pools and cascades the length of the garden where the eye is entranced by alcoves and dams constructed from local stone or imported Bath-stone. A triple-arched alcove is adorned by a stone plaque inscribed with verse describing Moses striking the rock, noted in Young's' account:

When Israel's wand'ring sons the desert trod
The melting rock obey'd the prophet rod
Forth gush'd the stream; the tribes their thirst allayed;
Forgetful of their God, they rose and play'd.
Ye happy swains, for whom these waters fflow,
Oh! May your hearts with grateful ardours glow!
Lo! Here a fountain streams at his command
Not oe'r a barren, but a fruitful land,
Where nature's choicest gifts the vallies fill,
And smiling plenty gladdens every hill. ⁵

Further downstream of singular beauty is the ashlar bridge encrusted with sculpted carvings and flanked on one side by an enigmatic '*homogenius*,'⁶ one of a pair originally⁷. From here one can glimpse the surviving eastern pier of an imposing rustic archway captured in a 1758 drawing by Lady Elizabeth Lee⁸ (Fig: 3) which sadly does not depict the giant statue of Neptune it once framed.

Last summer it appeared the patience and optimism maintained by the Trust over the past twenty years might at last be

rewarded when it was offered the option to purchase Mill Wood, the title to the garden's 22 acres held in separate ownership from the main park. A subsequent visit to the site reveals that recent restoration work commissioned by the current owners has much improved the previously neglected cascades and grottos. Even more excitingly they have uncovered a laurel tunnel leading to the spring grotto where a number of carved stone artefacts were discovered including a stone bust and a further inscription 'Passanger prepare for change'. The Trust has formed a project group to steer their campaign towards the acquisition of Mill Wood and you are invited to follow progress via their website.⁹ Halswell Park has attracted artists, engravers, poets and writers since the 1700s, with many of the original 18th-century and 19th-century works now displayed in prestigious museums in England and Wales. Later in the year the artistic aspect of Halswell's heritage, including John Piper's 'The Grotto, Halswell, Somerset' (1987), will be celebrated in an exhibition staged in the Temple of Harmony and, maintaining this tradition, the Trust has commissioned a birds-eye view of Mill Wood featuring vignettes of the follies.¹⁰

Time is of the essence if this important and enchanting rococo garden is not to be returned to the open market and 'lost' again. Any assistance you can give in helping to raise the necessary funds or add to research underway will be warmly welcomed.

¹ Gervase Jackson-Stops, 'Arcadia Under the Plough', *Country Life*, February 9, 1989, 82-7, p.83.

² *Ibid.*, p.86.

³ <http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk/BuildingDetails/Overview/241/Robin_Hoods_Hut>

⁴ Arthur Young, *The Farmer's Tour through the East of England*, 4 vols (London, 1771), 4, pp.16-21.

⁵ This verse has not as yet been attributed. I have written on the iconography of Mill Wood in 'A Polymath in Arcadia; Thomas Wright (1711 - 1786)', *Garden History*, 38, Number 2, Winter, 2010, 159 -176, pp.170-172.

⁶ Somerset Records Office: Entry by Sir Charles Kemys-Tynye for 3 July 1756, DD/S/WH\320.

⁷ The missing statue is stored in the nearby barn of a former owner who has spoken of his intention to return it.

⁸See <<http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?searchtext=cozens%2C+castle&orig=%2Fresearch%2Fsearch_the_collection_database.aspx&num_pages=10¤tpage=2&partid=1&objectid=732148>>

⁹ <<http://www.halswellparktrust.org.uk>>

¹⁰ 'Mill Wood, Halswell Park, Goathurst', completed in December 2012, is a Giclee print on acid-free, archivable Fine Art art paper (310gsm), measuring 23.4 by 16.5 inches. Limited to 75 copies, signed and numbered, the print is available to purchase via the Trust priced £75, unframed.

IMAGES

Figure 1



Temple of Harmony views from Mill Wood. Photo Halswell Park Trust

Figure 3



Drawing entitled "a View in Sr. Char. Tyntes Wood, at Halswell Somersetshire" by Lady Elizabeth Lee (1739 - 1811)

Figure 4



Unidentified stone bust in Elizabethan dress: photo Halswell Park Trust