

The History of English Gardens

Roger Askew

Monthly Speaker – Thursday 10th October 2019

ROGER ASKEW was a chorister at Wells Cathedral School and a choral scholar at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he graduated with an Honours degree in English. He combined a teaching career with professional singing in London, and after obtaining a further degree in Music became Director of Music at Daniel Stewart's and Melville College in Edinburgh. After retiring in 2003 he returned to the South of England. He is President Emeritus of The Stoke Poges Society, Chairman of the Arts Society Windsor and a Volunteer Guide in the Savill Garden.

Roger's talk to the Gardens Association following the AGM on the 10th October 2019 was a whistle-stop tour of gardens through the ages spread across England and Europe. His talk traced the development of English Gardens from medieval times, through the 17th century parterres and the English Landscape Movement of the 18th century to the taste for garden rooms and "painting with flowers" that typifies the 20th and 21st centuries.

Roger began his talk by stating "All gardens attempt to create a piece of paradise". Examples of paradise gardens that have been captured in landscape paintings through the ages include expansive views, bridges, lakes, trees and opulent planting which was symbolic of splendour, wealth and status, as outlined below:



With the aid of several medieval manuscript representations of gardens, moving gradually through time to the introduction of parterres in the seventeenth century Roger drew parallels with the evolution of famous gardens such as Versailles Palace and Gardens, an expression of power and wealth below.



Hampton Court Palace under the ownership of William III was transformed into a formal and regal estate, similarly, Kensington Palace with the addition of its splendourous Orangery.

The 18th Century "Courting Garden" was planted with red and white roses symbolising blood and purity. Trellis, secret obscure corners, garden rooms with intimate spaces were also key features, as outlined below.



Westminster Abbey and Lessines Gardens were illustrated as examples of herbal and medicinal gardens that influenced the practical development of the garden and its ongoing benefit in healing and well-being.



Westminster Abbey and Lessines Gardens

A key factor enabling livestock to be kept out of larger gardens was the development of the ha-ha boundary wall during the 18th and 19th century throughout the UK. Examples below illustrate the structure. To put it simply, the **ha-ha wall** is a ditch. But why that funny name? Well, the ha-ha comes as a surprise to unsuspecting visitors. The term describes the astonishment at a wide trench suddenly popping out into view.



Roger traced the development of the 18th Century English Landscape Movement which grew up as a reaction to the formal style of gardening and the need to look to nature for inspiration with the addition of rolling hills, water, shrubs, blooming perennials and gravel pathways.

The emergence of Tudor gardens that feature, knot gardens, Buxus sculpting and architectural features as seen at Hatfield House, where the Knot Garden is elaborate, interconnecting with cross planting symbolic of “love that cannot be unravelled” as illustrated below.



Key Influencers included Vita Sackville-West & Sir Harold Nicolson who transformed **Sissinghurst Castle Parks & Gardens** included below:



Roger named many of the major players who had left their legacies in the gardens they had helped shape: names such as Capability Brown - **Chatsworth House** , and Sir Humphrey Repton - **Blaise Castle** and **Woburn Abbey**, both of whom left their mark on local parks; and others such as Gertrude Jekyll who worked with Sir Edward Lutyens - **Hestercombe House and Gardens** to design hundreds of gardens. In addition, Lawrence Johnston, garden designer and plantsman - **Hidcote Manor** with garden rooms, vista and views: Christopher Lloyd - **Great Dixter**, Beth Chatto - **The Dry Garden**- and Rosemary Verey – **Barnsley House** were all named examples of the evolution of English Gardens.

18th century **Longleat House**, Wiltshire, illustrated by Kip Johannes drawings, creating order and structure in the garden, which was mirrored by the architecture, a feature that was carried into the 19th, 20th & 21st Century.

Queen Caroline of Ansbach in the 18th Century along with Charles Bridgeman and William Kent pioneered the naturalistic landscape style in their appointment to develop royal gardens. Roger paid tribute to those who had travelled widely to acquire new species of plants, namely, John Tradescant, Elder and Younger who sourced specimens and rarities including magnolias, bald cypress and tulip tree, phlox and asters from across the world.

The domestic cottage garden influenced by John and June Claudius Loudon was underpinned by the publication of the 1812 Gardening Encyclopaedia and 1826 Garden Magazine.

Snippets of practical advice included Head Gardener, Cliveden House, Anthony Mason who has a solution for Buxus Blight!